



COMMITTEE FOR EDUCATION

RESPONSE TO THE DEPARTMENT'S CONSULTATION

Draft Early Years (0-6) Strategy

1. The Committee for Education welcomed the Minister's decision to extend the consultation period on the Draft Strategy proposals to allow parents and stakeholders the time to consider the proposals and respond to them.
2. The Committee was briefed by senior Departmental officials on the draft Strategy proposals on 9 June 2010. The Committee consequently wrote to the Minister on 24 June 2010 listing a number of concerns which were raised during the briefing, on which it was felt were not sufficiently allayed by the Draft Strategy or officials' presentation. These include:
 - The complexity of Early Years provision with multiple providers; the potential for overlap in provision; the lack of equity in standards and variability between providers e.g. qualifications; underprovision and overprovision in some areas;
 - the absence of an evidence base on the benefits of early years education and assertion that '*there is an income-related gap in school readiness*' (paragraph 1.1) without reference to other possible factors related to school readiness, such as the number of books in the home;
 - the absence of an evidence base for '*focus more clearly on a continuum of play-based learning and development*' (paragraph 2.23) and an assessment/evaluation of the Foundation Stage of the Revised Curriculum;
 - clearly set out current legislative provisions and an indication of any future legislative proposals, including the reason for an element of non-participation in the Pre-school Education Expansion Programme and the inclusion of two-year-olds in the Programme;
 - the focus of the Draft Strategy on structure and the need for more emphasis on pedagogy;
 - the issue of potential change to the school starting age not being addressed (paragraph 3.10) – including the lack of information on the implications of a potential change;
 - the absence of any costings to implement the draft Strategy;
 - the absence of any mention of a recommended pedagogy for Irish Medium 0-6 provision; and
 - the extent to which '*The effective Pre-School Provision in Northern Ireland*' (EPPNI) project influenced the draft Strategy.

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3. At its meeting on 8 September the Committee noted the Minister's reply on 16 July 2010 (available on the Committee's web page¹) to these concerns and agreed to request a further briefing from Department of Education Officials on the Draft Strategy before the end of the consultation period. The Committee also agreed to take briefings from the National Association of Head Teachers (NAHT (NI)), Children in Northern Ireland (CiNI) and the Early Years Organisation on the Draft Strategy.
4. The Committee's concerns with the Draft Strategy were not diminished by briefings from the NAHT (NI) Nursery Education Committee and CiNI's Early Years Strategic Alliance (EYSA) at the Committee's meeting on 29 September 2010 or from The Early Years Organisation who also briefed the Committee on 6 October 2010, which raised additional concerns with the Draft Strategy.
5. The Committee received a second briefing from the Department of Education on 6 October 2010, which addressed a number of the concerns raised by the Committee and by stakeholders. However, the Committee felt that a number of outstanding issues remained, and agreed to host an event in Parliament Buildings to provide a platform for stakeholders to raise their concerns directly with Departmental officials and help inform the Committee's scrutiny of the policy proposals. The Committee requested Hansard to prepare a full transcript of this event – which is now available on the Committee's website together with the briefing papers of the key stakeholders represented at the event.²
6. **This Committee event, evidence sessions and correspondence with key stakeholders identified a number of serious concerns. The key areas of concern are summarised below and referenced to individuals and organisations that raised concerns and issues, together with the Committee's comments and/or recommendations.**

ABSENCE OF CROSS-DEPARTMENTAL APPROACH TO EARLY YEARS

7. The Committee shares the concerns of stakeholders that a cross-departmental approach is required to adequately address the social, educational and health needs of children in their early years:
 - *“we urgently need a medium to long-term vision for early years and for that vision to be delivered through a collaborative approach involving all the relevant Departments and stakeholders. Unfortunately, I believe that the draft strategy contains too many gaps to be either strategic or integrated.” (Early Years Strategic Alliance (EYSA))*
 - *“The fact that seven Departments have to be dealt with must be addressed. Otherwise, this is not a strategy but simply a discussion about existing DE-funded provision. That is not strategic vision.” (Sue Pentel – Belfast District Childcare Partnership)*

¹ http://www.niassembly.gov.uk/education/2007mandate/early_years/ministers_response.pdf

² http://www.niassembly.gov.uk/education/2007mandate/education_early_years.htm

The Committee's concern was not allayed by Departmental Officials, who acknowledged that,

- *“Many Departments, including the Department for Employment and Learning (DEL), DE, DHSSPS, the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development (DARD) and the Department for Social Development (DSD), have supported childcare for different agendas to tackle disadvantage or to promote training and education.” (Senior DE Official)*
- *“There are fundamental issues around how Departments can work together. In an area such as this, it is important that the Executive take a collective lead and bring all Departments together under one agenda. That is something for our Ministers and our political leaders, some of whom are here tonight, to do.” (Senior DE Official)*

The Committee agreed to move a motion in the Assembly in the following terms:

“That this Assembly notes the early years (0-6) strategy consultation by the Department of Education and the comments of stakeholders; agrees that there is a clear need for a cross-departmental and holistic approach to early years provision; and calls on the Minister of Education to develop a cross-departmental and holistic early years children's strategy and action plan which will fully integrate provision for the social, care and educational needs of young children from pre-birth to age six.”

During the debate on 6 December 2010, the Minister of Education informed the Assembly that,

“During the consultation on the draft strategy and here in the Assembly today, concerns have been expressed that the draft strategy needs to be more broadly based and needs to provide a cross-cutting overview of the Executive's approach to early years provision. It has been suggested that it should cover the social, care and educational needs of all young children from pre-birth to age six and those of their parents and prospective parents. A strategy of that nature would be much wider than the Department of Education's responsibility and would impact on the Departments of a number of my colleagues in the Executive. I have written to the junior Ministers in the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister and the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to request a meeting to seek their views in the first instance and to help me decide how I wish to proceed [See Annex A]. A decision to progress the cross-departmental strategy and action plan proposed would be a matter for the Executive.”

In concluding the debate in the Assembly on behalf of the Committee, Dominic Bradley, MLA urged that,

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“Minister, rather than waiting on a response from the junior Ministers and the Health Minister, will take the issue on board and champion it. She should take the initiative with other Departments and not be passive and wait for a response from others.”

In its submission to the Committee the Early Years Organisation commented on the need to ‘to ensure...that appropriate data and resources are available to support planning.’

Reference was also made by stakeholders that better communication and information sharing between, for example, SureStart, Early Years and Nursery Schools would enhance holistic support and services to young people.

Access to data across departments was discussed by the Committee in the context of Free School Meals uptake and increasing uptake, and the Committee wrote to the Department of Education asking about data sharing exercises with other departments. DE’s reply in January 2011 stated:

‘You asked about data sharing exercises undertaken by the Department in relation to free school meals entitlement uptake. The Department has, in recent years, investigated this issue but, at present, there is no legal gateway to enable the electronic sharing of data between Departments.’

Recommendation: The Committee notes and welcomes the Minister’s letters to Ministerial colleagues, and recommends that she actively encourages at Executive level a joined up and holistic approach to early years which encompasses all the relevant Ministerial Departments (DEL, DSD, DARD as well as DHSSPS and OFMDFM) and agencies, including encouraging agreements for the electronic sharing of data .

ABSENCE OF FINANCIAL PLANNING IN DRAFT STRATEGY

8. The Committee shares the concerns of stakeholders that the absence of detailed costing plans in the Draft Strategy renders its feasibility difficult to assess:
 - *“The Absence of Costing and Financial Projections – This invalidates the Strategy totally as it is impossible to establish if it will use funding available to improve children’s opportunities and experiences. No consultation can be considered fair and informed if stakeholders do not have opportunity to examine the finance that supports it especially considering the financial constraints ahead.”*

“In addition to the quality of the strategy, the consultation process is completely invalid due to the total absence of any cost projections or funding models.”

(NAHT (NI))

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- *“There is no substantive commitment from DE to make changes to funding mechanisms in the near future and it appears that ‘resource constraints’ may be DE’s get-out mechanism.” (CiNI)*
- *“The 0-6 Strategy must follow on from its vision with clear goals, regulations, quality standards, funding commitments, targets and timescales.” (Early Years – The Organisation for Young Children)*

The Committee welcomes the Minister’s decision to afford protection to Early Years in the Department’s Draft Allocations and Savings Proposals, particularly the £3million additional resources in 2011/12. Doubt remains however, whether this will be sufficient to deliver on the draft Strategy’s aims, given the acknowledgement that:

“Funding will present a significant challenge as many of the programmes are fairly expensive and will require significant investment if they are to be extended in the way that people want.”(Senior DE Official)

The Committee also noted the additional one off payment of £200 per place in private/voluntary pre-school providers recently announced by the Minister of Education out of monies set aside for expanding capacity for pre-school places in the 2010/11 financial year.

Recommendation: The Committee recommends that the Minister draws up a detailed costing plan for the Education component in the revised, joined up and holistic, Draft Strategy as soon as possible, consulting with key stakeholders as necessary.

DISPARITY OF QUALIFICATIONS ACROSS THE EARLY YEARS SECTORS

9. Whilst acknowledging that there are outstanding issues surrounding the level of funding across the statutory and voluntary sectors of pre-school provision, the Committee shares concerns around the disparity of both the level of qualifications and access to qualifications of workers in the pre-school sector:
 - *“Short to medium term goals over the next 5 years... Develop a training, qualifications and professional development strategy for the **entire workforce** working with this age group recognising the experience many staff will bring with them.” (Early Years – The Organisation for Young Children)*

The Committee welcomes the fact that the Draft Strategy is working towards *“raising the minimum level of qualifications for those working in all DE funded early years*

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settings” (para 4.7.i.a), although the Committee is mindful of concerns expressed about the cost-effectiveness of upskilling less qualified staff rather than utilising an existing qualified workforce of unemployed teachers, particularly with increasing constraints on the education budget:

- *“I am totally distraught at the strategy’s proposal to invest millions of pounds in retraining childcare workers to be upskilled, when so many teachers like me have not got permanent posts and are willing to be teachers and provide a high-quality education. All this money is being invested in that when so many of us are already willing to do it.” (Ms Karen McConkey)*
- Responding to Ms McConkey, DE officials emphasised the economic benefits of increasing the skills of the workforce but acknowledged ‘.. the point about teachers, however, is an important one, and we will take that back to the Department and talk to colleagues about it.’
- *“[The Welsh Government] found that the quality of children’s learning was not sustained in the settings that used solely nursery-assistant staff as opposed to qualified teachers. Therefore, it appears that there is a direct link between qualified teachers and the quality of provision and pedagogy. It is not just about upskilling and providing more resources. It is about how you use resources and your skill as a professional to adapt your approach in the ever-changing environment of an early years classroom.” (Ms Susan Campbell, NAHT (NI) Nursery Education Committee)*

Recommendation: The Committee recommends that the Department actively consider the cost effectiveness and affordability of options for increasing access to pre-school provision led by qualified teachers or those holding equivalent early years qualifications, including utilising the existing pool of qualified teachers as well as the upskilling of less qualified staff.

LACK OF CLARITY ON SCHOOL STARTING AGE

10. The Committee shares the concerns of stakeholders that the Draft Strategy fails to address the issue of the school starting age in Northern Ireland:
 - *“The longer-term goals are to develop an early education and care act that provides a legislative basis for the financing, supervision and co-ordination of all education and care services for young children; to work towards a graduate pedagogy in the workforce for all who care for and educate young children; and to raise the school starting age to six.” (Mrs Pauline Walmsley – Early Years)*
 - *“The document states that there was a brief consultation about raising the school starting age. However, there was no mention of that in the response document. We*

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obviously put down our concerns in one section, but there was no specific section to put down comments about raising the school starting age.” (Mr Ray Cromie – NAHT (NI))

- *“We believe there is a pressing need to provide some measure of flexibility within the current system. There is particularly compelling evidence that some of those children who are the youngest within their year cohort when they enter primary school may not be achieving their full potential. For this reason, we would like the Department of Education to introduce a measure of flexibility. At a minimum, this would enable parents of the very youngest children, those with premature births and/or those with non-stated additional needs to have a right to defer their child’s entry for a year. Ideally, we would like parents of all children who would be under five when they start school to be able to apply for deferral for a year if they feel it would be in the child’s best interests.” (Dr Liz Fawcett – Parent)*

The Committee do however concur with the Department that:

“[raising the school starting age] would obviously be a major piece of work that would require the agreement of Ministers. It would clearly have huge structural implications for the entire sector.” (DE Official)

The Committee wrote to the Department on 4 November 2009 on the issue of school starting age, and were informed that, *“[The Department] is also aware that we have the youngest starting age to formal learning in Europe...It is expected that the Strategy will consider how the Department manages the transition from pre-school to the Foundation Stage of the revised curriculum, which aims to ensure that the children are introduced to education in a way and a pace that takes account of their age and level of maturity”.*

The Committee welcomes the Department’s intention in the Draft Strategy to *“to begin a consideration of the implications of any potential change to the school starting age”* (para 3.10). However the Committee considers the issue needs to be fully addressed and proposals on a way forward set out, particularly on an issue with such *‘huge structural implications’*.

The Committee commissioned an Assembly Research Briefing Paper on School Starting Age which highlighted the relative earliness at which children in Northern Ireland begin formal education compared to children in other European countries, most of whom begin at age six and others at ages five or seven (NIAR 621-10).

In responding to the Committee’s Early Years Motion, the Minister of Education informed the Assembly,

“In my view, the compulsory school starting age here is too low, when compared with Scandinavian countries such as Finland. It again led the way in the latest OECD PISA survey, with a school starting age of six. Further, I believe that there is merit in considering other, less formal, more flexible approaches to the school starting age,

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such as that in the South of Ireland, where parents can choose to enter their children into the formal education structures at any time between the ages of four and six.”

Following the Committee Motion, the Committee wrote to the Department asking for further clarity as to what the Minister meant by her comments, and were informed that *“the Minister will wish to consider the views expressed during the consultation before taking a view on the way forward on the issue of the compulsory school starting age”*.

Recommendation: The Committee recommends that the Minister sets out a way forward and timetable for addressing the issue of school starting age, consults on policy options with key stakeholders, and provides a draft policy proposal for public consultation.

CONSULTATION

11. The Committee welcomes the Minister’s decision to extend the consultation period for the Draft Strategy, which was announced during the debate on the Committee’s Early Years Motion on 6 December 2010:

“I want to ensure that there is a full and frank consideration of the issues. I want all interested parties to know that they have had the opportunity to contribute to the debate and to have their voice heard. That being the case, I can announce that I am extending the consultation period on the draft strategy to 31 January 2011 and that we will consult children as part of that.”

However, the Committee retain concerns as to the quality of information made available about the consultation and within the Draft Strategy:

- *“I would not have known about this consultation but for [NAHT], nor would many other parents. The association’s efforts made me aware, and a lot of my ilk do not know about this public consultation. With that in mind, I strongly recommend that the consultation period is extended. The consultation began at the end of June/July, at the end of the school term. Parents did not have the opportunity to find out about the consultation until their children started at nursery. If it was not for some head teachers and some nursery education providers, we would not have known.”*
(Mr Stuart McKenzie, Parent)

The Committee is also concerned as to the validity of consultation responses as they were largely offered prior to availability of information on the draft Budget:

- *“The Department has also failed in its promise to re-consult the working groups prior to the release of the strategy. We in the NAHT ask that the Department of Education extend the consultation period and, in light of the current economic climate, publish additional information giving full details of all expected costs and financial projections relating to the strategy. We also ask that the Department of Education highlight which areas of the strategy, in its current form, it would*

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implement first and how it proposes to fund and roll-out the strategy over a five-year period. Only when we have that level of information, and only when that level of detail is made available to parents and stakeholders, can the consultation be truly regarded as valid and informed.” (Clare Majury, NAHT (NI))

Recommendation: The Committee recommends that future consultations are carried out with greater visibility and that draft strategies include proposed implementation plans with timescales and estimates of the costs of implementing each phase of the proposals; to ensure the widest possible response and avoid the need to extend the consultation period, as occurred with this Draft Early Years (0-6) Strategy and previously with the consultation on Every School a Good School: The Way Forward of Special Educational Needs and Inclusion.

CONSULTATION RESPONSES

12. The Committee requests a full written submission analysis of the consultation responses and what the Minister/Department proposes to do with each policy proposal, together with proposed action in the form of an Action Plan including timescales, estimate costing, and any legislative change proposals.

February 2011

Annex A
Minister of Education's letters to Ministerial colleagues

FROM THE MINISTER/ÓN AIRE



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5 December 2010

A Gerry a chaire,

In June 2010, I launched a draft Early Years (0-6) Strategy for consultation. The purpose of the draft Strategy is to set out a vision and plan for the development of Early Years services. It seeks to ensure better outcomes for children by setting out a framework to improve the provision and quality of services to the youngest children, their parents and families over the next 5 years. The primary focus of the Strategy is on educational services although this, of course, overlaps with DHSSPS responsibilities in the case of the youngest children and we have sought to develop a Strategy that reflects the drive for cohesion in the policies and services affecting early years so that children and parents get the best outcomes possible.

The draft acknowledged that the implementation of the Strategy will need to take account of a wide range of policies and strategies in development and in place within the Department of Education (DE) and in other Executive departments. During the consultation on the draft Strategy, concerns have been expressed that the draft Strategy needs to be broader based and to provide a cross-cutting overview of the Executive's approach to early years provision. This would cover the social care and educational needs of young children from pre-birth to age six.

Clearly, this proposal is broader than the current Strategy which has a strong focus on learning and education. I would suggest, therefore, that a meeting involving both Junior Ministers would be useful in the first instance to consider the implications of this proposal.

If you are agreeable to meet, perhaps your Diary Secretary would contact the DE Private Office to arrange a date which is convenient for both you and Robin.

I am also writing to Robin Newton in similar terms.

*ca gair dea ghair
caitriona ruane*

CAITRIONA RUANE MLA



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FROM THE MINISTER/ÓN AIRE



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I am also writing to Gerry Kelly in similar terms.

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