

Written Ministerial Statement

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Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister

Bright Start: the Executive's Programme for Affordable and Integrated Childcare (A Strategic Framework and Key First Actions)

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Mr P Robinson (The First Minister) and Mr M McGuinness (The deputy First Minister): At the start of December last year, we launched a three-month public consultation on the Childcare Strategy. We received dozens of written submissions from a range of individuals, groups and organisations, and from our own Assembly Committee. We also heard the opinions of the people who attended the public events organised by us and the events organised by the main childcare stakeholders. We have heard from people in rural areas, and those in towns and cities. We have heard the opinions of childcare providers and specialists; the views of parents; and the views of the children themselves.

Consultation has made us all the more aware that many people cannot access the type of childcare they want. It has made it clear to us that many people here need more information about the types of childcare available if they are to find the form of care that meets their needs and the needs of their children. Finally, consultation has brought home to us the extent to which many people here struggle to meet the costs of childcare.

Based on the emerging priorities from the consultation process, *Bright Start* has been developed, including a range of key early actions to help us deliver our vision for childcare.

Bright Start sets out the strategic direction of the Childcare Strategy and lists a number of key first actions that will be put in place to address the main priorities identified during public consultation, including:

- a shortage of childcare provision, notably in rural areas and for the key age group 4-14;
- support for children with disabilities;
- a lack of information on childcare provision;
- the high cost of childcare services; and
- the need for clear, departmental accountability for the Childcare Strategy.

Bright Start states that the long-term vision of the Childcare Strategy is to create a joined-up sustainable service, supporting development needs and positive changes

for children. These key first actions attempt to address the provision of childcare services and the cost, quality and accessibility of those services.

The performance of these actions will be monitored and this process will allow further engagement to take place with key stakeholders to enable us to publish the final Childcare Strategy in 2014.

The key first actions are as follows:

We will create or sustain some 6,000 new affordable school-age childcare places – childcare for the 4-14 age group. We will achieve this through a combination of new provision and support for existing childcare providers. Across the region, we will pilot a new approach to wrap-around care in the schools estate based on initial funding to create a minimum of 2,000 places. This could potentially rise to 3,000 places dependent on demand. We will also support the expansion and creation of 3,000 affordable places within a social enterprise model in areas in the 25% most deprived wards.

To address further the needs of rural areas, we will support, on a phased basis, a Rural Childminder Start-Up Package creating up to an additional 1,000 childminder places in rural areas. We will reinforce the above programme through supporting locally based transport schemes in rural areas, servicing networks of childminders in rural locations.

We will fund two further phases of the DHSSPS-led pilot – Improving Outcomes for Disabled Children – already underway through the Childcare Fund – which provides small capital grants enabling registered childcare settings to adapt to cater for children with a disability reinforced by training provision.

We will implement a range of improvements to the Family Support Website (www.familysupportni.gov.uk) to enhance it as a central source of information on childcare and providers operating at local levels.

We will develop a social media application (App) to provide better search functionality, more information channels and ultimately better and more accessible information at the touch of a button for parents.

Within the framework of the Executive's position on advertising, we will seek to promote both of the above through a publicity campaign which will also explain the benefits of registered childcare and the risks of unregistered childcare so that parents can make informed choices.

Again, within the framework of the Executive's position on advertising, we will seek to promote the financial assistance available to the many parents who find the costs of childcare a challenge, with the explicit aim of increasing uptake. This may involve an awareness-raising campaign and associated practical advice for the two forms of financial assistance currently available through the tax and benefits system to help parents with the affordability of childcare.

We will support a training programme to improve and enhance skill across the workforce.

We will work with other programmes to ensure good quality training of unemployed people as a pathway to work in childcare.

We will seek to align and promote existing initiatives to enhance the skill base and support continuing professional development in the childcare sector.

We will support initiatives to encourage greater diversity in the childcare workforce – with particular reference to males and individuals from ethnic minority communities.

We will establish a Childcare Strategy Management Forum that will meet quarterly to scrutinise and review how the early actions are being implemented. Departments with a policy interest in childcare – OFMDFM, DE, DHSSPS, DSD and DEL – will participate on the Management Forum. Local and stakeholder opinion will be represented through the Childcare Partnerships.

Conscious of public demand that a single department take the lead for childcare policy, we will agree a department that can fulfil this role and chair the Management Forum.

These first actions have been developed in line with priorities that have emerged through responses to the consultation document *Towards a Childcare Strategy* issued in December 2012. The consultation process sought views from the public, the childcare sector, parents and children in relation to childcare needs, priorities and issues. Views were obtained via a range of consultations, public meetings, workshops and written responses from stakeholders.

The first actions have also been informed by research reports and studies undertaken by the childcare sector in recent years and OFMDFM commissioned research involving parental and childcare provider surveys to statistically analyse childcare needs and parental preferences and to provide a robust evidence base to prioritise and target actions in specific thematic areas.

The first actions build on what already exists (by way of capacity, interventions and physical facilities) and aim to better join-up and improve this provision. We envisage that these actions will be implemented together, as a package, in order to maximise their impact on the accessibility, quality and affordability of childcare provision.

Some of the first actions are pilot projects designed to further refine and test uptake by parents, with a view to potential expansion thereafter. Other actions are designed to improve information in relation to childcare in order to improve parental choice and accessibility of childcare and therefore are permanent interventions.

Childcare is a critical enabler to help parents into work, move families out of poverty and help to break the cycle of inter-generational deprivation. Good quality childcare, which provides positive experiences and promotes children's opportunities to develop, is also potentially a building block for a stable and prosperous future for individuals, for families and for communities.

We are delighted, therefore, to be able to launch today *Bright Start: the Executive's Programme for Affordable and Integrated Childcare (A Strategic Framework and Key First Actions)*