

Written Ministerial Statement

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Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister

Draft childcare strategy: launch of consultation

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Mr P Robinson (The First Minister) and Mr M McGuinness (The deputy First Minister): In line with our Programme for Government commitment, we are today launching the draft Childcare Strategy for public consultation. The consultation document and details on how to respond to the consultation are available on the OFMDFM website as follows: <http://www.ofmdfmi.gov.uk/childcare>.

This draft Childcare Strategy has two main aims:

- **Developmental:** to give all our children the best start in life, preparing them for lifelong wellbeing and achievement, thereby creating the basis for a better, more prosperous future
- **Employment:** to enable parents to join the workforce, thereby enhancing prosperity, and to improve gender equality by enabling mothers to join the workforce, return to work and remain in work.

These aims are supported by seven key objectives: **availability, affordability, sustainability, diversity, quality, informed parental choice** and **an integrated approach**.

Delivering the Childcare Strategy and achieving its aims and objectives will require co-ordinated action across a range of government departments and services. We launched the first phase of the Strategy in September 2013, including a set of 15 Key First Actions to address the most immediate childcare needs and priorities identified during consultation and research. These initial steps focussed on: increasing the types of childcare provision most in need; building the skills base of the childcare workforce; providing parents with more detailed and user-friendly information; and establishing a partnership approach between Government Departments and the childcare sector.

In this, the full 10 year Strategy, we will now examine how we might build on those preliminary actions, making good any gaps. Firstly, we are proposing to develop our initial 15 actions into the 22 areas of development set out in this document. We will, for example, look at the options for extending the support we currently provide to school age childcare to cover the full range of childcare services and childcare providers. We will consider how to make childcare services more responsive to the needs of all parents, regardless of where they live, including the need for more flexible care, available outside of conventional working hours. Ways of making the financial assistance available with the costs of childcare more widely known and used will also be examined.

This draft Childcare Strategy has been developed on a co-design basis. The purpose of co-design is to ensure that stakeholder knowledge is taken fully into account during the development of the Strategy. Building on this and by continuing to work with the childcare sector and with childcare stakeholders, we will roll out the selected and affordable interventions and thereafter continue to monitor and evaluate the performance of our Childcare Strategy and report on our findings.

The consultation will run for 16 weeks until 13 November 2015, and the process will be supported by a series of regional consultation events which will take place in Belfast and other cities and towns. Details of the consultation events will be advertised on the OFMDFM website and will be publicised by

our childcare stakeholders. We would encourage everyone who has an interest in this key policy area to engage with the consultation process by responding to the consultation questions or by attending a consultation event.