

employers

For Childcare

charitable group

Mr Mike Nesbitt MLA
Chair, Committee for the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister
Room 346, Parliament Buildings
Ballymiscaw, Stormont
Belfast
BT4 3XX

23 February 2015

Dear Mike,

Children's Services Co-operation Bill

I am writing in response to your call for submissions as part of the Committee's consideration of the Children's Services Co-operation Bill.

At Employers For Childcare Charitable Group, which encompasses two social enterprises and a charity, we work towards the aim of helping parents with dependent children get into work and stay in work. Our charitable services include the Family Benefits Advice Service, which provides advice and information to parents about their financial entitlements, childcare and work related issues. We also carry out research and lobby government on behalf of local parents.

We welcome the opportunity to respond to the Committee's call for submissions on the Children's Services Co-operation Bill, which is intended to improve outcomes for children across Northern Ireland. As well as endorsing the consultation response made by Children in Northern Ireland, we are raising the following points to focus particularly on the social and economic value of childcare in enhancing children's outcomes.

We fully support the Children's Services Co-operation Bill and agree that the six outcomes relating to the well-being of children and young people, as listed in the 10 Year Strategy for Children and Young People 2006-2016, should form the basis of the duty to co-operate. Delivery of these six outcomes, through better co-operation across departments and public bodies, will benefit all children and young people living in Northern Ireland. Without doubt, there is much to be done to improve the quality of that co-operation, as research and statistics continue to show that rates of child poverty are growing and that many local families are coming under increased financial pressure. There is an urgent need for intervention through the development of cross-cutting strategies to support families, to ensure that the efforts of all departments and agencies are co-ordinated effectively.

M A K I N G W O R K B E T T E R F O R E V E R Y O N E

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The six outcomes focus on providing the best possible results for children and young people, and it is important to remember that this requires a holistic approach involving both parents and children. Parents must, therefore, be supported in practical ways to enable them to support their children to experience these outcomes. Research shows time and time again that when parents are actively involved in the lives of their children and are committed to providing the best start in life for them that children's outcomes are improved.

The Child Poverty Alliance's recent *Beneath the Surface: Child Poverty in Northern Ireland* report pointed to the need to support the parents who are struggling to give their children better and safer lives. This is particularly important for those families who are affected by poverty. The rate of in-work poverty is a growing problem in Northern Ireland, and in those families where parents are struggling to make ends meet, the whole family suffers as a result. We know that the lack of affordable and suitable childcare is a contributory factor to the rate of poverty, and in particular in-work poverty, in Northern Ireland. The lack of progress on the development of a Childcare Strategy to date is just one area which could be improved by the measures contained within the Children's Bill. Childcare is a policy area which impacts on several government departments, yet little progress has been made in improving the childcare infrastructure despite the clear need that has been demonstrated through various pieces of research, including our own Childcare Cost Survey series. Childcare has proven benefits for both children and parents, and is a key tool for early intervention. This is just one area where better co-operation, involving parents, could improve outcomes for children.

We call for further consideration to be given to how the out-workings of this legislation will ensure that parents are supported to help their children achieve these outcomes.

If you would like to discuss the points we have raised in more detail, please do not hesitate to contact me by email at mairaid.mcmahon@employersforchildcare.org.uk.

Yours sincerely,

Mairaid McMahon
Director of Charity Services

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