

Equality Commission for Northern Ireland

Commission urges renewed focus on childcare and early-years provision to support families and children from across the equality groups.

August 2020

The Commission urges prompt action to extend appropriate, accessible and affordable early-years education and childcare provision.

- 1.1 The COVID-19 pandemic has demonstrated the fundamental importance of childcare and early-years support - in facilitating the economic participation of parents / carers, and ensuring the development and progression of children from a range of equality categories.
- 1.2 High quality early-years provision can have significant beneficial impacts for children from particular equality groups. Childcare provision is also important in promoting equality between men and women.

Executive commitment to childcare and early-years and update on progress

- 1.3 The Commission welcomed the New Decade, New Approach¹ commitment that the Executive would publish a Childcare Strategy and prioritise the delivery of early education and care initiatives. The Commission also welcomes the focus of the proposed Strategy on both child development and parental employment in the context of advancing equality for children, parents and families from a range of equality categories.
- 1.4 We note the Minister for Education's July 2020 Assembly update² on the Childcare Strategy, including that work on the Strategy may not recommence for a number of months, and

¹ [New Decade, New Approach](#) (at page 40) commits the Executive, within its 2019/20 PfG priority actions: The Executive will publish a Childcare Strategy and will give immediate priority to developing arrangements to deliver extended, affordable, responsive, high quality provision of early education and care initiatives for families with children aged 3-4.

² [AQO 507/17-22](#), AQs week ending 24 July 2020

that Department of Education staff have been deployed to other areas of response to the COVID-19 pandemic.

- 1.5 We note the Minister's reference to the importance of securing Executive "commitment to significant new and sustained funding" to deliver priorities reaffirmed in New Decade, New Approach. In this context we note with concern the Minister's indication that there is "no allocation currently available for childcare within the DE budget" and that if funding is approved "design, planning and phased implementation will take a number of years".
- 1.6 The COVID-19 pandemic has further demonstrated the fundamental importance of good quality and affordable childcare to families, the economy and society. The effective provision of childcare and early-years support is a necessary component of the response to COVID-19, both in facilitating the economic participation of parents / carers, and in ensuring the development and progression of children.
- 1.7 While recognising the current context, including pressures on available resources, there remains a need for prompt action. We urge the earliest prioritisation of actions that will extend appropriate, accessible and affordable early education and childcare provision.

Advancing equality: fundamental importance of effective childcare and early-years provision

Childcare

- 1.8 Good childcare provision is key to increasing economic participation and women's economic independence and in promoting equality between men and women. The Commission has for many years highlighted that the lack of childcare provision impacts women disproportionately and that lone parents are likely to be particularly affected.
- 1.9 The Commission has long-standing positions³ calling for appropriate, accessible and affordable childcare provision to meet the specific needs of working parents, carers, and children from across the range of equality categories. Our recommendations include calls for childcare provision to

³ ECN (2013) [Policy Positions on Childcare: Maximising the Economic Participation of those with childcare responsibilities, usually women.](#)

facilitate a range of working patterns and thus economic participation; for employers to maximise flexibility; and for Government to review revenue streams, and explore innovative ways of developing and supporting childcare to maximise the quality and sustainability of provision, including during times of fluctuating or lower demand.

- 1.10 Academic research, supported by the Commission, in 2013 argued⁴ that “much of Northern Ireland childcare (e.g. playgroups, Sure Start centres) is not intended to facilitate employment, and its short, sessional format does not cover the hours that working parents require”, noting that “research has suggested that this provision is not always available or affordable for parents. Existing studies of childcare in Northern Ireland suggest that availability is patchy, insufficiently flexible, and not always of high quality, but prices are relatively high, especially when compared with average family wages. Some types of family may also face additional barriers to accessing childcare, such as those in rural areas, parents with disabled children or parents with more and/or very young children.”

Early-years provision

- 1.11 High quality early years provision plays a key role in children’s development, and can have significant beneficial impacts for those children most at risk of educational underachievement. It has a significant impact on children from particular equality groups – including children from minority ethnic communities⁵ and children with disabilities⁶.
- 1.12 There is a long-standing body of evidence pointing to the importance of effective early-years provision. For example, European Commission research (2010) found that children who attended high quality provision had better performance in school, and better economic and social outcomes in later life⁷.
- 1.13 2010 research in Northern Ireland has found that children who did not attend pre-school showed poorer cognitive and

⁴ McQuaid, R., Graham, H., Shapira, M., (2013), [Childcare: Maximising the Economic Participation of Women](#), Equality Commission for Northern Ireland.

⁵ DE (2017) [A compendium of evidence on ethnic minority resilience to the effects of deprivation on attainment](#)

⁶ DE (2015) [Study of Early Education and Development: meeting the needs of children with special educational needs and disabilities in the early years](#), page 11

⁷ EU High Level Group of Experts on Literacy (2012) Final Report

behaviour outcomes than their peers who attended pre-school⁸. A number of reports from Northern Ireland have⁹ highlighted that early interventions are more effective and less complex than later remedial action. Save the Children (2013)¹⁰ has also argued that given the gap in children's development by the age of three, the highest priority should be given to the development of a fit-for-purpose early childhood education and care model.

- 1.14 In the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, the loss of over one term of pre-school education will have a detrimental impact on children's development, in at least the short term. Those for whom it usually has the most significant impact, including children from minority ethnic communities and new residents¹¹, and children with disabilities¹², will likely feel the loss most acutely¹³.

⁸ Sylva, Melhuish, Sammons et al (2010) Early Childhood Matters: evidence from the effective pre-school and primary education project, cited in Northern Ireland Assembly Research Paper (2013) Early Years Provision, NIAR 68-13

⁹ For example, Purvis, D., (2011) Educational disadvantage and the Protestant Working Class, A Call to Action, p 7; PUP (2015) Firm Foundations, Educational Underachievement and the Protestant Working Class Education: Getting it right for every child

¹⁰ Save the Children (2013) Too Young to Fail, Closing the educational achievement gap in NI p.3

¹¹ DE (2017) [A compendium of evidence on ethnic minority resilience to the effects of deprivation on attainment](#)

¹² DE (2015) [Study of Early Education and Development: meeting the needs of children with special educational needs and disabilities in the early years](#), page 11

¹³ Whilst socio-economic disadvantage is not a specified ground under the equality legislation, the barriers and inequalities experienced by equality groups can be exacerbated by poverty and social exclusion. There is a need for urgent action to address poverty and social exclusion experienced by a range of equality groups.