



The NI Executive's
Programme for Affordable
and Integrated Childcare
Strategic Framework and Key First Actions

BRIGHT START

The NI Executive's Strategy for Affordable and Integrated Childcare

A Strategic Framework and Key First Actions

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FOREWORD

Over the past twelve months, we have made clear our commitment to delivering a strategic direction and actions that will deliver joined-up and affordable childcare. 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 struggle to 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.

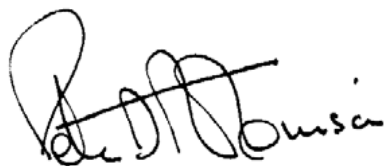
This document sets out the framework, principles and a range of key actions to help us deliver our vision for childcare. It also allows further engagement to take place with key stakeholders to enable us to publish the substantive and more detailed Strategy for Affordable and Integrated Childcare in 2014.

Many parents today want or need to work; to work longer hours; or take on more responsibilities at work. Many want to train for work, or to study in order to improve their prospects. Often, however, parents find they are hindered from working, training or studying through a lack of adequate childcare. These are the people we want to help. We want to ensure that no parent who wants or has a need to work or acquire workplace skills is prevented from doing so because the quality, reliable childcare they rightly demand is not accessible to them. We want to help people get into work—or back into


work—confident that, while they are working, their children are being cared for in a safe, nurturing environment.

Employment with a reasonable wage is the best path out of disadvantage and poverty. We want, through our Childcare Strategy, to help as many people as possible take that path.

At the same time, we must not lose sight of the obvious—children are at the heart of childcare. In addition to the benefits good quality childcare brings to the adult workforce, it has a key long term benefit in terms of what it delivers to our children. It is essential that the Strategy gives pre-school children a sound start in life while for older children it must supplement and complement, in a relaxed and informal way, their development and education. Good quality childcare, which provides positive experiences and promotes children’s opportunities to develop, is a starting point for lifelong achievement. That, too, is a proven path out of disadvantage and towards a more prosperous future for individuals, for families and for communities.



Rt Hon Peter D Robinson MLA
First Minister



Martin McGuinness MLA
deputy First Minister

CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

- 1.1 “Childcare” for the purposes of this policy framework, is the safe supervision of children, aged 0-14, in an environment that assists and enriches their development, education and life opportunities and enjoyment.
- 1.2 The Programme for Government, 2011-15, commits the Executive to *‘publish and implement a Childcare Strategy with key actions to provide integrated¹ and affordable childcare’*.

KEY FIRST ACTIONS

- **Bright Start Community Child Care Programme** - 3000 affordable and integrated child care places supported and created through social enterprise.
- **Bright Start Wraparound Programme** – 2000 affordable and integrated child care places within the schools estate.
- **Bright Start Rural Programme** – a rural childminder start-up package creating up to 1,000 childcare places and roll out of a social enterprise model in rural areas creating, potentially, an additional 1,000 school aged childcare places.
- **Bright Start Childcare Information** – a programme of better dissemination of information.
- **Bright Start Workforce Development Programme** – enhancing the skills base of the childcare workforce.

In addition, **Bright Start** will help childcare providers address the needs of children with a disability.

- 1.3 The Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister (OFMDFM)

¹ In the context of this Strategy, the term ‘integrated childcare’ refers to bringing together childcare, education and child development provision.

has been leading on the development and coordination of the Childcare Strategy. OFMDFM has been working in partnership with the Government Departments responsible for policy areas relevant to childcare, and liaising with stakeholder and sectoral interests.

1.4 The Executive intends the Strategy to deliver a high standard of childcare provision that meets the needs of parents throughout Northern Ireland. To this end, it has specified six policy principles to underpin the development of the Strategy:

- Affordability
- Accessibility
- Sustainability
- An integrated approach
- Quality
- Informed parental choice

1.5 This present framework document sets out the vision and objectives of the Childcare Strategy, including a set of key first actions which will start this financial year — critical initial steps towards the establishment of an improved and expanded system of childcare here.

Programme for Government

1.6 The Childcare Strategy will be aligned with the primary focus of the Programme for Government which is *'to grow the economy and tackle disadvantage'*.

1.7 Within this wider context, the Childcare Strategy is integral to the Executive's other key policy initiatives—the anti-poverty agenda; the *Strategy to Improve the Lives of Disabled People, 2012-15*; the *Child Poverty Strategy*; the *Children and Young People's Strategy*; the

Gender Equality Strategy, and Delivering Social Change.

Delivering Social Change

- 1.8 The Childcare Strategy is an important part of the Executive's *Delivering Social Change* framework. *Delivering Social Change* aims to deliver:
- a sustained reduction in poverty and associated issues, across all ages; and
 - an improvement in children and young people's health, wellbeing and life opportunities, thereby breaking the long-term cycle of multi-generational problems.
- 1.9 Early years interventions and good quality childcare, including school age childcare, are widely accepted as critical factors in a child's development. It is internationally recognised that quality child-centred activity in a safe place can promote positive interpersonal relations, develop cultural awareness and complement educational provision. This can lead to enhanced social skills and improved educational performance. In time, childcare can address at least some of the ill effects of disadvantage and deprivation.
- 1.10 An important aim of the Strategy is therefore to support the development of children and young people, and to enable children and young people from all backgrounds, including the most deprived, to avail of life opportunities.
- 1.11 However, it is not just children who benefit from childcare. Childcare is a critical enabler to help parents² into work, move families out of poverty and help to break the cycle of inter-generational deprivation. Supported by an affordable, flexible and accessible childcare sector, parents can access work, improve their workplace skills and their employability, or continue to be economically active.

² In this document, 'parent' refers to anyone who has parental responsibility.

- 1.12 Therefore, along with its child development aims, the Childcare Strategy will aim to ensure that no parent who wants or has a need to work, or to undertake work related training or study, will be prevented from doing so by a lack of childcare. Women in particular will benefit from this aspect of the Childcare Strategy. The provision of affordable childcare will mark an important step forward in terms of equality of opportunity. It will empower women who wish to join the workforce, or who wish to train or study to improve their workplace skills and earning potential.
- 1.13 Increased paid employment will protect families from hardship and poverty. Moreover, at a regional level, a growth in employment will raise the levels of economic activity, so that whole communities will benefit.

Current Childcare Provision

- 1.14 DHSSPS data indicate that, in 2011/12, there were 5,320 registered childcare providers in Northern Ireland. Childminders accounted for more than three quarters of this total (77%); playgroups, 9%; and day nursery and out of school providers, 6% and 5% respectively. Between them, these providers offered nearly 56,000 childcare places. With some 355,000 children under the age of 15, there is around one registered childcare place for every six children. Childminders accounted for nearly 40% of the 56,000 places, day nurseries, around a quarter, and playgroups some 20%. More than 80% of all provision here is therefore focused on younger, pre-school age groups.
- 1.15 Recent research, commissioned by OFMDFM³, indicates nearly three quarters of parents use some form of childcare, but this is often with an informal provider such as a relative or friend, rather than with a formal, registered provider. 40% of respondents, particularly those in

³ RSM McClure Watters and Ipsos MORI - Draft findings May 2013.

rural areas, said that they would like to see more registered childcare provision.

Building on current childcare provision

- 1.16 Childcare needs to be flexible. It needs to be capable of meeting the needs of parents who require childcare during conventional working hours, and those who work shifts or irregular hours. It also needs to be able to provide for children with disabilities and special needs, to meet the specific development needs of children from disadvantaged areas, and the needs of children who are vulnerable or at risk.
- 1.17 The formal childcare settings currently available here (private, community and voluntary, statutory, and social economy) provide a safe and nurturing environment for children, with little or no government funding. This diversity of provision has the potential to offer flexibility and choice, and thereby to help ensure that there is a strong childcare sector which meets differing needs and which is capable of responding to and supporting wider social change.
- 1.18 The Childcare Strategy will aim to build on this existing provision taking account of current gaps, envisaged future pressures, and the availability of public expenditure. In addition, we will keep a watching brief on developments proposed by the Coalition Government in relation to their plans to introduce new tax free childcare scheme for working families.
- 1.19 Existing provision is likely to come under greater pressure in the years ahead. In particular, the advent of Universal Credit, a key element of Welfare Reform, will remove the minimum hours threshold for reclaiming formal childcare expenses through the Tax Credits system. This may increase demand for existing childcare services and make the childcare market more attractive to new providers.

Executive Childcare Fund

- 1.20 In 2011, the Executive set aside £12 million to support the development of the Childcare Strategy over the period 2011/12 to 2014/15. In anticipation of the Strategy, several projects have already been assisted from the Fund, including an initiative to improve the registration and inspection system for childminders, and projects focusing on the needs of children with disabilities, after school provision, and the childcare needs of vulnerable families.
- 1.21 The new childcare fund was established to support the development of the Strategy, and the remaining funds will be used to support our key first actions. In addition, some childcare initiatives may be able to qualify for a share of the funding available under *Delivering Social Change*—around £118 million. There is therefore a significant resource base that will be used to support the key first actions and pilot projects relevant to the Childcare Strategy.

Consultation and Research

- 1.22 Public consultation on the Childcare Strategy began on 5 December 2012 and closed on 5 March 2013. During the consultation period, the Department received 65 written responses. It also organised a series of public consultation events throughout Northern Ireland and engaged PlayBoard to consult with children and young people. In addition, several stakeholder and sectoral groups organised their own consultation events, many of which were attended by OFMDFM officials. The OFMDFM Assembly Committee also provided a written response to the consultation.
- 1.23 Alongside the consultation process, the Strategic Investment Board (SIB) has been carrying out, on behalf of OFMDFM, research to establish: childcare supply and demand; gaps in provision; current and emerging needs, and options for potential Government intervention in the childcare market. The SIB has participated fully in the consultation process, attending all of the OFMDFM events and

many of the sectoral and stakeholder consultations as well. SIB has also met with childcare stakeholder groups to hear their proposals and priorities for the Strategy. As a result, SIB's research to date has been fully informed by the comments and submissions received during consultation, and by sectoral and stakeholder opinion.

- 1.24 Finally, OFMDFM has commissioned RSM McClure Watters to carry out surveys of parents and childcare providers to estimate childcare supply and demand, and focus on issues such as cost.
- 1.25 All consultation responses, and the findings of the ongoing research projects, are being taken fully into account in developing the Childcare Strategy. (Annexes 1 and 2 summarise the consultation responses; Annex 3 summarises research findings to date).

CHAPTER 2: VISION AND OBJECTIVE

- 2.1 The Executive is committed to publishing and implementing a Childcare Strategy in 2014. The Strategy will address the developmental needs of children and it will help the many parents who want to work, train, or study, to do so.
- 2.2 This present Strategic Framework sets out our vision for childcare, our objective, and the key first of the key actions we will be taking to get us there. It will also facilitate some further engagement with the childcare sector and other interested parties.
- 2.3 **Our Childcare Strategy will create a joined up, sustainable service, supporting development needs and positive change for children across our society.** Through delivery of the Strategy, we will address key areas of identified need, including: provision for school age children, provision for rural areas, and provision for children with a disability.
- 2.4 In order to achieve this, we will expand upon the excellent childcare services that already exist here to create a joined up, affordable and integrated system that meets the needs of parents and children alike.
- 2.5 We recognise that the needs of children—and the childcare needs of parents—are diverse. One size does not fit all. We therefore intend to build upon the diversity of current childcare provision to create a system that can offer flexibility and choice; one that can both promote, and respond to, lasting social change.

Vision

- 2.6 Our vision is that, by building upon the diversity of existing provision, and joining it up into a single, integrated but flexible system, we will achieve, by 2020: **a joined-up sustainable service, supporting development needs and positive change for children across our society.**

2.7 The Childcare Strategy, which will be published in 2014, will:

- **Promote the well-being of all children in support of their developmental needs.**
- **Enable parents, particularly women, to: enter or remain in the workforce; to train for work; or to study, thereby contributing to enhanced economic activity, greater gender equality and reduced child poverty.**
- **Recognise the diversity of childcare needs.**
- **Offer parents flexibility and choice.**

Objective

2.8 It is our objective that the childcare system will:

- **Promote the well-being of all children in support of their developmental needs.** Childcare is for children. The needs of children will be core to the Strategy. This will include:
 - (i) A commitment to the principles and provision of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) and the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNCRPD) to promote the rights and best interests of children and their families; and
 - (ii) Endorsement of a model of provision that combines care with a broad range of development activities to provide a foundation for personal growth and lifelong learning.
- **Enable parents, and particularly women, to enter or remain in the labour force, to train for work, or to study, thereby contributing to enhanced levels of economic activity, greater gender equality, and reduced child poverty.**

- **Recognise the diversity of childcare needs**, the Strategy will incorporate different types of provision catering for particular constituencies of need⁴.
- Ensure that the Strategy offers parents sufficient **flexibility and choice** as to how they balance home and work commitments. This will, in turn, contribute to increased gender equality in the workforce.

⁴ e.g. rural communities, families with children with special needs or a disability; ethnic minority families, families in poverty, and the traveller community.

CHAPTER 3: KEY FIRST ACTIONS

Introduction

3.1 We are pleased to announce a series of key first actions to bring about positive change in supporting parents, children and childcare providers with a view to establishing a more accessible and affordable childcare system in Northern Ireland, within a framework of high quality provision and associated parental choice. These key first actions are summarised in the table below with more details in the paragraphs following.

<p>School Age Childcare</p>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. We will sustain and create 3,000 places for school age childcare targeted at families in need. The extended and new facilities will be rolled out as social enterprises across the 25% most deprived areas. The places offered may increase if demand can be demonstrated as the programme rolls out. 2. 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 2000 places; this could potentially rise to 3000 places dependant on demand.
<p>Rural Childcare</p>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 3. We will support on a phased basis, a Rural Childminder Start-Up Package creating up to an additional 1,000 places in rural areas as part of the key first actions. 4. We will reinforce the above programme through supporting locally based transport schemes in rural areas, servicing networks of childminders in rural locations. 5. We will also support a social enterprise programme to roll out facilities in rural areas, with the potential to create up to 1,000 new affordable, school age childcare places.
<p>Childcare for Children with a Disability</p>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 6. 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.
<p>Better Access to Information on Childcare and Related Financial</p>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 7. We will implement a range of improvements to the Family Support Website (www.familysupportni.gov.uk) to further enhance it as a central source of information on childcare and providers operating at local levels.

Support	<p>8. 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.</p> <p>9. Within the framework of the Executive's position on advertising campaigns, 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.</p> <p>10. Within the framework of the Executive's position on advertising campaigns, 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.</p>
Workforce Development	<p>11. We will support a training programme to improve and enhance skills across the childcare workforce.</p> <p>12. We will work with other programmes to ensure the good quality training of unemployed people as a pathway to work in childcare.</p> <p>13. We will seek to align and promote existing initiatives to enhance the skill base and support continuing professional development in the childcare sector.</p> <p>14. We will support initiatives to encourage greater diversity in the childcare workforce, particularly from under-represented groups.</p>
Management Arrangements	<p>15. We will establish a Childcare Strategy Management Forum that will meet quarterly to scrutinise and review how the key first actions are being implemented.</p>

3.2 These key 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.

- 3.3 The key 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.
- 3.4 The key first actions build on what already exists (by way of capacity, interventions and physical facilities) and aim to better join-up and improve them. 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.
- 3.5 Some of the key 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.

School Age Childcare

- 3.6 School Age Childcare (SAC) is a marked area of under-provision here. There are around 230,000 school aged children in Northern Ireland presently and looking ahead for the next ten years population projections suggest that the growth in the 0-14 constituency that will arise is wholly linked to the SAC age bands (5-14) in that the pre-school element is projected to experience marginal decline over the same period.

- 3.7 Presently, there are 6,075 registered places in out-of-school clubs as well as 5,736 places for children aged 5-14 within home-based child-minders – i.e. one place for 20 children. Out-of-school clubs emerged as the most prevalent area of unmet demand in the OFMDFM research. This reinforces previous research from the childcare sector suggesting that it is a long-running deficiency. The research suggests that accessibility, in the main, prevails as the key barrier over and above affordability. However, it is also clear that where accessibility is not an issue the affordability of schemes can still be a challenge for parents. As such, there is an immediate need to safeguard existing capacity and to build additional capacity. To this end, we will implement the following by way of our key first actions and pilots, with involvement of SAC related expertise within the five Childcare Partnerships to ensure better co-ordination of supply and demand.
- 3.8 Our approach has been to focus on the cost of providing childcare. The key actions we have agreed focus on supporting, enhancing and rolling out affordable childcare models based on community and third sector led social enterprise.

Bright Start Community Programme

- 3.9 We recognise the importance of safeguarding and extending existing provision for the most disadvantaged communities and families in need. Currently OFMDFM funds some 40 out-of-school schemes operated by voluntary and community sector (VCS) providers in disadvantaged areas and offering around 1,000 SAC places. We will treble this capacity to 3,000 places over the next two years by supporting existing schemes to expand as well as new start-up schemes, initially targeted at school aged childcare. The schemes will have a focus on child development, while providing the service of childcare for parents who need it. These Bright Start Community Childcare Schemes will be targeted at families most in need—those living in the 25% most disadvantaged areas. An agreed methodology for this targeting is being developed to help groups achieve supporting those families in need. Support will be given to existing facilities to expand, if demand can be demonstrated. The scheme will also include provision for mentoring to move those VCS

organisations that have better prospects for sustainability onto a social economy operating model.

- 3.10. Social mixing is an important and positive influence on children. We are therefore keen that, although the Bright Start Community Programme is targeted at those families most in need, that there is a social mix of children which will contribute not only to the experience and development of the children but will also aid sustainability of the enterprise.
- 3.11 Business support will be given and all new and existing enterprises will have a sustainability plan. All enterprises will have an incentive package and support with start up costs. A subvention, if required, will be available to ensure affordable childcare can be offered. Assistance will be based on a 24-place model. If demand exceeds or fails to meet this, then flexibility will be shown to reach a sustainable level of provision.
- 3.12 Places will be offered at a tariff based on the ability of the parent to pay. Maximum tariffs will be put in place to ensure affordability for all, with a reduced scale based on ability to pay. However, childcare voucher and child tax credit uptake should be maximised.
- 3.13 In line with the models identified under this programme, we will also target up to an additional 40 new social enterprise start ups in rural areas, if demand can be demonstrated, this would potentially create up to 1,000 affordable school age childcare places. This will be part of the Bright Start Rural Programme outlined below.

Bright Start Wraparound Programme

- 3.14 Across the region, we propose to pilot a new approach to wrap-around childcare in the schools estate, targeted initially at school aged children - that will emphasise social and emotional needs and the development of self-esteem and resilience - and not viewed as an extension of the school day. We will encourage external providers (from the private and community sectors) to avail of the business opportunity that the schools estate offers for childcare as the best way to achieve this separation rather than the service

being operated by school staff. This provision will be distinct from the Extended Schools agenda which is centred on educational achievement and the longer term life chances of disadvantaged children and young people, but should be complementary and supplementary to it.

- 3.15 In terms of physical facilities, we will provide if necessary, an enabling capital budget to facilitate small scale adaptations to existing facilities to create the right environment for the service. We will implement this pilot initiative based on delivery by a managing agent who will lead the roll-out of the pilot phase, in conjunction with the involvement of SAC related expertise within the five Childcare Partnerships to ensure better co-ordination of supply and demand. The managing agent will be responsible for recruiting and advising the schools involved and ensuring adherence to the vision and objectives of the scheme.
- 3.16 Within the initial pilot phase we will target an additional 2,000 SAC places across primary school settings and encourage the schools involved to provide places for children within and outside the school enrolment, which should help to promote cross-community provision. This could rise to 3,000 places in the initial phase if demand can be demonstrated. These settings will be part funded, the level of which is still to be determined, although it will take account of the actual cost of delivery of childcare provision, the make-up of the geographical area, differing levels of need within areas, parental contributions based on ability to pay and ensuring a maximisation of tax credits and childcare vouchers.
- 3.17 The provision will ideally be provided by a social enterprise provider, and maximum tariffs to be charged will be set down as part of the incentive package offered. Tariffs will be based on the ability to pay.

Bright Start Rural Childcare Programme

- 3.18 Rural areas face particular and distinct challenges in relation to the delivery of, and access to, rural childcare services, linked to insufficient critical mass to sustain services, isolation and logistical/ transport challenges. In many instances unmet demand forces parents to take their children to other

facilities in nearby villages and towns, which can result in children not being integrated into their local community. In turn this is a threat to the fabric of rural communities and associated rural identity. Previous interventions⁵ have demonstrated the impact of localised childcare provision in reducing poverty and promoting inclusion in rural areas, by enabling rural families to effectively participate in rural economic, political and social life.

3.19 Many of our rural areas have a high proportion of their population accounted for by the 0-14 age-band and the research undertaken by OFMDFM would suggest, in broad terms, that vacancies/excess capacity are predominantly urban, not rural – suggesting as per previous sector research that there are shortfalls in the accessibility of childcare in some rural communities.

3.20 All of the key first actions cited in this document will be delivered in rural communities and indeed we will ensure that the criteria to access them are ‘rural proofed’. In addition, we intend to implement on a pilot basis:-

(i) **A Rural Childminder Start-Up Package** similar to a previous programme successfully delivered through DARD’s Rural Childcare Programme in 2010. It will offer start-up grants to encourage more individuals to choose childminding and to go through the registration process. The grants will help with the cost of setting up and registering as a childminding business. One-to-one mentoring support will also be provided for those individuals going through the registration process and during their first year working as a childminder. Registered childminding is a significant element of the current childcare infrastructure here (almost 40% of the current 55,914 registered places) and can be very responsive and flexible to localised need and therefore is particularly suitable to address unmet need in rural areas. We will seek to deliver an additional 1,000 registered childminder places in rural areas as part of the key first actions.

⁵ E.g. via DARD Rural Childcare Programme now ceased

- (ii) We will seek to reinforce the above programme through supporting **locally based transport schemes** in rural areas, servicing networks of childminders in rural locations.
- (iii) We will also support a social enterprise programme to roll out facilities in rural areas, with the potential to create up to 1,000 new, affordable, **school age childcare** places.

Childcare for Children with a Disability

- 3.21 Various research reports by the sector highlight that there is limited up-to-date information on the prevalence of children with a disability here, with estimates cited at 35 disabled children per 1,000 children under 16. Around 15,000 children (under 16) are currently in receipt of Disability Living Allowance, which is one indicator of the potential scale of need.
- 3.22 The issues in respect of childcare for children with a disability include difficulties in finding childcare providers with the requisite skills and experience to offer the level of specialist support that children with disabilities require; lack of flexibility to accommodate childcare requirements, which may change on a regular basis; lack of specialist equipment/ accessibility requirements in childcare premises; cost can be prohibitive where a child with disabilities requires one-to-one care which requires employment of specialist staff; and parents often lack confidence to leave their child with disabilities in childcare, as they do not believe that it will be able to meet their particular needs.
- 3.23 Set against the above issues, DHSSPS, through funding from the Childcare Fund, has started to implement an initiative to address barriers to childcare for children with disabilities / complex needs entitled 'Improving Outcomes for Disabled Children'. This encompasses the provision of small grants for registered childcare settings (including childminders) which can be used to pay for / contribute towards the cost of specialist equipment or small premises adaptations, to cater for children with a disability. The second element of the scheme encompasses a Children's Disability Training Programme which is extending the expertise in the childcare workforce to

cater for children with a disability. This scheme has already successfully supported 65 childcare settings through the small grants programme and a wide range of providers through the training. We intend to fund two further phases of the initiative over the next two years, based on positive evaluation and implementation of any fine-tuning required from the activity funded this year.

Bright Start Childcare Information

3.24 If childcare is to be accessible to all parents who wish to use it, parents need to know how to find it and have sufficient information to make appropriate choices. It is essential that accessible information is provided to parents on the various choices available to them locally, alongside information on key issues such as financial assistance through the tax and benefits system for childcare and mechanisms to avail of such financial assistance.

3.25 Key first actions in respect of this area are:

- (i) A range of improvements to the Family Support Website (www.familysupportni.gov.uk) developed by the Health and Social Care Board for Northern Ireland to further enhance it as a central source of information on childcare and providers operating at local levels. For instance we will improve the search functionality of the website for parents to better inform parental choice e.g. using keywords, postcodes, experience of staff, flexible hours, pick up/drop off facility etc.
- (ii) In addition 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, when they need it, on childcare options and services.
- (iii) Within the framework of the Executive's position on advertising campaigns, both of the above will be promoted 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, and to encourage unregistered childcare providers to come into the arena of registered provision – to provide the necessary protection to children, parents and the providers / childcarers involved.

- (iv) Within the framework of the Executive's position on advertising campaigns, we will 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 include 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 - which are the childcare element of the working tax credit and childcare vouchers. In respect of both, current uptake here is limited and significantly lags behind regions within Britain. This will ensure that we lever the maximum benefit from Treasury funded initiatives, to increase the affordability of childcare, before planning additional interventions funded from our Block grant. This campaign will be funded on a pilot basis for a year only, in that the emerging Coalition Government plans for a new childcare tax break are intended to replace both of the above post 2015.

Bright Start Workforce Development

3.26 We recognise that the development of a high quality workforce is core to the provision of high quality childcare, in that the quality of the relationship between carers and children is a significant factor in ensuring positive development outcomes for the children involved.

3.27 Key first actions in respect of this area are:

- (i) A training programme to improve and enhance skills across the childcare workforce.
- (ii) Work with other programmes to ensure the good quality training of unemployed people as a pathway to work in childcare.

- (iii) Alignment and promotion of existing initiatives to enhance the skill base and support continuing professional development in the childcare sector.
 - (iv) Support for initiatives to encourage greater diversity in the childcare workforce, particularly from under-represented groups.
- 3.28 The key first actions have the potential to create (or safeguard) up to 750 childcare jobs.
- 3.29 An integrated workforce development strategy will be a central element of the final Childcare Strategy to be published in 2014 – providing an over-arching children’s workforce career and qualification pathway framework with joined-up training provision. This would involve the Northern Ireland Social Care Council, the Skills for Care and Development Skills Council, DHSSPS, the Department for Employment and Learning, and the childcare sector, potentially represented through the Childcare Partnerships managers and training/quality officers.
- 3.30 In the short-term, however, and as part of the key first actions, we intend to respond to immediate needs that have been identified through the consultation process to date.
- 3.31 We will be working through the Delivering Social Change framework to target relevant childcare training as a pathways to work issue.

Establishment of a Childcare Strategy Management Forum

- 3.32 We will establish a Childcare Strategy Management Forum that will meet quarterly to scrutinise and review how the key first actions are being implemented. The Forum will consist of relevant Government departments and the Childcare Partnerships, which will give voice to local and stakeholder interests. A lead Department will be identified that will have overall responsibility for the Childcare Strategy when published in 2014.

Next Steps

3.33 We will immediately begin the process of rolling out the key first actions. However, as we work towards the substantive Bright Start Strategy, we will also be examining issues of affordability, accessibility and flexibility within all childcare sectors, including provision for 0-3 year olds in day nurseries, and the private and childminder sectors.

**“TOWARDS A CHILDCARE STRATEGY” - PUBLIC CONSULTATION
EVENTS HELD FEBRUARY/MARCH 2013**

SUMMARY OF RESPONSES

Introduction

1. The Programme for Government 2011-15 commits the Executive to ‘*publish and implement a Childcare Strategy with key actions to provide integrated and affordable childcare*’. Public consultation on the Strategy opened on 5 December 2012 with the publication of the consultation document *Towards a Childcare Strategy*.
2. Public consultation ran from 5 December 2012 to 5 March 2013. Written submissions were received throughout the consultation period and a series of public consultation events were organised in February/March 2013 in Belfast (20 February); Armagh (21 February); Enniskillen (25 February); Ballymena (27 February); Derry/Londonderry (4 March). These events were organised to enable OFMDFM Ministers and officials to engage directly with public, prompt group discussions, and obtain views on the forthcoming Childcare Strategy.
3. The paragraphs below summarise the main issues raised and the proposals put forward during the public events.
4. In addition to the issues below, many consultees noted that the consultation centred on open-ended questions rather than on actual policy proposals. While many welcomed the open-ended approach, a recurrent suggestion was that a further consultation process would be beneficial once the Strategy had been drafted. While it was acknowledged that this would delay the delivery of the final Strategy, many consultees said they were willing to accept a short delay if this meant a better and more informed Strategy.

Role of the Strategy

5. Generally, consultees believed that childcare should not simply be about looking after children in a safe environment. It was also deemed important that any system of childcare should deliver positive developmental benefits in terms of education and growth.
6. Play was seen as an important aspect of childcare; but childcare should also have an educational dimension.
7. There was a view that childcare needed to have a child-centred ethos and be a positive experience for the children involved. Childcare was seen as potentially delivering benefits such as improved self-esteem and confidence.
8. Quality childcare was looked upon as having the potential to address emerging mental health problems at an early stage, preventing these from manifesting in adolescence or adulthood.
9. The potential value of using the schools' estate as a location for childcare activities was recognised by many consultees. At the same time, some expressed concern that school was primarily a place for teaching rather than care. They advised that the use of the school estate for 'wraparound' care (childcare in the hours before and after the school day) could mean an 8-10 hour day in the school estate or classroom. If the school estate was to be used in this way, then it needed to be used imaginatively—e.g. afterschool activities taking place somewhere other than the classroom, with different rules (e.g. dress codes) applying outside of formal teaching hours. Children were seen as needing space to be children and enjoy childhood as a time of personal growth and discovery.
10. Use of the schools' estate was also seen as potentially divisive—increasing the time that children spent in an environment segregated by religious community background. It was noted that many community and voluntary sector facilities were cross community and that the Childcare

Strategy should ideally be promoting sharing and cross-community engagement.

11. Some consultees thought that childcare should not simply be for the children of working parents or parents who wanted to train or study. Quality childcare, with a developmental and/or educational ethos was also seen as potentially beneficial for children whose parents were unemployed or economically inactive. Some consultees believed that these were the children who might benefit most from quality childcare.
12. It was noted that the childcare sector was a significant employer—the third largest in Northern Ireland by some estimates—and that it had the ability to impact positively on the regional economy.
13. Childcare providers often operated on a business model. However, many providers emphasised that childcare was not solely about profit; it had wider social objectives. Nonetheless, childcare providers were generally required to bear many or most of the same overheads as conventional business organisations. Some thought this inappropriate.
14. Some consultees believed that childcare needed to be seen less as a cost and more as an investment.

Provision

15. While many consultees stated that there was a shortage of childcare places, some disagreed and said that there was no undersupply. It was noted that providers often carried vacancies and that the market for childcare services was quite competitive.
16. Some thought that the demand for childcare might be understated as many people might not be able to afford childcare. There was considerable anecdotal evidence of reliance on informal care and on unregistered childcare.
17. Some consultees thought there might be duplication of childcare provision. Statutory provision through, for example, Sure Start or Extended Schools,

was seen as actually or potentially displacing private and/or community and voluntary sector provision.

18. A qualified and committed childcare workforce was seen as a vital part of childcare provision. Many considered it important that the childcare workforce was suitably skilled and that those skills were continuously improved and developed.
19. It was considered important that experienced childcare staff be retained in the childcare workforce. There was seen to be a need to move away from the idea of childcare as a relatively low-paid, short-term occupation and, instead, establish it as a professional career.
20. Several consultees were critical of the training available for prospective or existing childcare staff. In some areas, there was little or no training available; in others, training was seen as of mixed quality.
21. Flexible childcare provision—e.g. a childcare provider being able to offer a few hours service at short notice—was seen as desirable for parents who worked shifts, or irregular or unsociable hours. However, this type of provision was seen as difficult to organise. The ratio system was an incentive for providers to fill places on a full-time basis wherever possible. Providers were unlikely to accept a child on a part-time basis in preference to a child who could attend full-time.
22. The lack of provision for student parents was noted, particularly in the context of the University of Ulster's recent decision to close its crèches.
23. Childcare in rural areas appears particularly dependent on childminders. Nursery schools and similar types of provision tend to be located in towns. Transport was seen as a key issue for rural childcare provision. Transport costs added considerably to the childcare costs of people in rural areas.
24. Statutory provision targeting disadvantaged areas (e.g. Sure Start) was sometimes criticised on the grounds that people who lived in a disadvantaged area, but who were not themselves disadvantaged, could

benefit. Similarly, people who were disadvantaged, but living in relatively affluent areas, could not benefit.

25. School age childcare (SAC), addressing the age group 4-14, was seen as a major gap in current childcare provision. The absence of formal care during the school summer holiday was seen as a particular problem. The Extended Schools scheme was sometimes seen as failing to meet all SAC needs and as potentially duplicating established SAC provision.
26. Current childcare provision was seen as insufficient for children with disabilities. Children with disabilities often required one-to-one care. Ratios tended to discourage providers from accommodating children with disabilities. In order to take on children with disabilities, providers had to adapt their premises. This added to cost.
27. Current childcare provision was seen as failing to meet fully the needs of Travellers and ethnic minority people. Some providers thought they might benefit from language training or from support services that would enable the parents of ethnic minority children to liaise with providers.
28. The following were noted by way of potential government interventions to address provision issues:
 - Greater attention needed to be given to matching supply and demand, possibly through more effective area-based planning;
 - Intervention should focus on filling current gaps in provision—provision for disadvantaged areas; provision for children with a disability; SAC provision; rural provision; provision for Travellers and ethnic minority people;
 - Government's approach to childcare provision needed to be more holistic, taking stock of existing/established providers before enabling or facilitating new provision;

- Some consultees favoured an initiative against unregistered childcare, possibly through an awareness raising campaign advising of the risks of unregistered care.
29. However, it was also noted that any initiative against unregistered childcare might simply force unregistered carers out of business, thereby putting greater pressure on informal carers or existing, registered providers. Some consultees therefore favoured an amnesty for unregistered providers along with an initiative to progress them to full registration.
30. Many thought Government should build an experienced and qualified childcare workforce through, for example, bursaries for trainees and subsidies to providers to enable them to absorb rather than pass on the salary costs of qualified staff
31. There were suggestions that Government should consider a more flexible approach to ratios, particularly to enable more flexible childcare provision in line with the needs of parents working shifts, or unsociable or irregular hours.

Costs

32. Discussion on the costs of childcare focused on two separate areas—the costs to parents and the cost to childcare providers.
33. Parents generally regarded the cost of childcare services as high. The financial pressure was seen as falling, in particular, on middle income working families—families whose household income tended to exclude them from any significant level of assistance. For these families, childcare costs were viewed as absorbing a high proportion of the available income; often most or all of a second salary. There was anecdotal evidence that childcare costs put pressure even on some relatively affluent families

where, for example, there was a need to meet existing, inescapable financial commitments such as mortgage payments.

34. For providers, service quality enhancements tended to increase the cost to parents since factors that improve quality (e.g., staff training, facilities and equipment, and meeting health and safety requirements) added to cost and, in a business model, generally needed to be recovered through increased charges.
35. Qualified and experienced staff were a particular cost factor for many providers. Well qualified or experienced staff inevitably commanded higher salaries, thereby pushing up the costs of childcare provision. If a member of staff from a childcare facility attended a training course, the fee had to be paid and the absent member of staff replaced by a suitable, short-term substitute.
36. Among both parents and employers, there was often limited awareness of childcare vouchers and childcare-related tax credits.
37. Some providers expressed concern that the current tax credit and voucher schemes were open to abuse. There was anecdotal evidence of parents placing a child with a registered provider in order to qualify for the relevant tax credits, then transferring the child to informal or unregistered care.
38. The costs of setting up as a childcare provider were generally seen as high. Relevant costs included training, and meeting health and safety requirements. Some childminders and day care providers reported difficulties competing financially with school estate provision.
39. The types of start-up support available to prospective childcare providers were not always appropriate. There was seen to be significant support for conventional business start-ups but much less support for the more specialised work of childcare provision.
40. Relatively small assistance could be effective. Childminders participating in the consultation events noted that, previously, they had had some

support with insurance costs and training and that this had been beneficial. Relatively low-cost training courses had sometimes allowed childminders to offer educational and developmental activities, rather than just care.

41. The following priorities for intervention were suggested:

- there was some support for a universal, subsidised system of childcare; for some, the estimated cost of such a scheme was a potentially worthwhile investment.
- Government should make direct payments (e.g. tax credits) to childcare providers rather than to parents.
- support for community and voluntary sector providers needed to be multi-annual rather than year on year.

Information

42. Word of mouth was often the principal means by which people found out about childcare opportunities in their area. Official websites such as the DHSSPS Family Support website, and social services, were also noted as sources of information. However, the Family Support website appeared to be not widely known outside of Belfast and Derry/Londonderry. There was a view that it could be better promoted.

43. Some consultees suggested that information on childcare opportunities might be included in the information packs provided to new mothers. Information on SAC opportunities might be provided at key stages in a child's development—e.g. at the start of primary, and the start of post-primary, education.

Integrated Approach to Childcare

44. Most consultees believed that there needed to be a single Minister, and a single Department, with overall responsibility for childcare. However, there was no consensus as to which Minister/Department this should be.

45. Consultees noted that different Departments provided funding for different types of childcare activity with the result that funding often came from a variety of sources, came with different reporting arrangements and was not synchronised. A single, coordinating Department with overall responsibility for childcare, and a single childcare budget would overcome this problem.
46. Consultees accepted that any Childcare Strategy would need to build on existing provision, which is cross-sectoral, and fill in any gaps identified. However, it was proposed that better coordination was needed between Departments, between sectors (statutory, community and voluntary, private) and between schemes (Sure Start, Extended Schools) to ensure against duplication.
47. A key priority for the Childcare Strategy was to establish a Department with primary, coordinating responsibility and, if possible, establish a single childcare budget.

Summary

48. The public consultation events suggest considerable support for childcare with an educational dimension - “educare” - and a prevalent view that childcare was not simply a cost to government but also an investment with the potential to deliver long term social, economic and educational benefits.
49. Consultees gave generally qualified support to proposals to use the schools estate as a location childcare, especially SAC. Use of the schools’ estate could be justified on economic grounds but there needed to be clear differentiation between formal educational activities during the school day and out of school hours activities. SAC activities should ideally be cross community. Single identity schools should aim to promote cross community SAC.

50. Some consultees believed that the demand for childcare was understated because many parents relied on informal carers (e.g. relatives) or on unregistered carers. There was a perceived undersupply of SAC provision, provision in rural areas, and provision for children with disabilities. Duplication of provision was identified as a problem in some areas. Area-based planning was advocated as a means of avoiding duplication and addressing current gaps in supply.
51. Workforce development—a better qualified childcare workforce—was viewed positively as a basis for promoting a quality childcare system. However, it was also recognised that a better qualified childcare workforce would increase costs. Some consultees suggested that government should subsidise training and/or subsidise childcare providers to enable them to bear the costs of better trained and qualified staff.
52. Most believed that information on childcare provision and on government support with the costs of childcare (e.g. tax credits) needed to be better publicised. Uptake of vouchers and tax credits was acknowledged to be low. There was some support for payments being made directly to providers.
53. Most consultees favoured a more joined up approach to childcare provision with a single responsible Department, and coordination of activity across Departments and sectors.
54. While many consultees welcomed the open-ended nature of the consultation process, there were recurrent requests for a further consultation exercise on the actual Strategy and its proposals, once these had been drafted.

“TOWARDS A CHILDCARE STRATEGY” - WRITTEN RESPONSES TO PUBLIC CONSULTATION

SUMMARY OF RESPONSES

Introduction

1. Public consultation on the OFMDFM Childcare Strategy opened on 5 December 2012 with the publication of the consultation document *Towards a Childcare Strategy*. Consultation closed on 5 March 2013. Sixty-five written responses were received from individuals and organisations, including from childcare providers.
2. This Annex summarises the opinions and suggestions put forward in the written responses.
3. The following are the principal themes that featured in the written submissions:
 - Role of the Strategy;
 - Current Provision;
 - Costs of Childcare;
 - Available Information;
 - Integrated Approaches to Childcare; and
 - Welfare Reform.

Role of the Strategy

4. OFMDFM has set out to create a Childcare Strategy that is integrated, affordable and of a good quality. A number of responses echoed this view.
5. Responses emphasised the importance of allowing children to play and letting “children be children”. Organisations such as the Irish Congress of Trade Unions and Mencap noted in their responses the importance of making sure provision is available for children with disabilities, especially during the school holidays.

6. Organisations like the Northern Ireland Childminders' Association, Employers for Childcare and Early Years proposed that, when developing a Childcare Strategy, it is important that OFMDFM acknowledges the capacity and skills that currently exist in the sector. This could be enhanced by encouraging workforce development through learning and development opportunities.

Provision

7. Consultees felt that there was a need for greater flexibility of provision to reflect the needs of shift workers. South Belfast Sure Start noted that this is of particular concern to ethnic minority families because they are often shift workers and/or on temporary contracts.
8. Some organisations proposed using the existing schools' estate to provide "wrap-around" childcare—school age childcare in the hour before the start of the school day (e.g. breakfast clubs) and in the hours after the school day has ended (after school clubs). One school that has made use of this arrangement is Oakwood Integrated School in Dunmurry. In the Oakwood after school club, children tend to do their homework, then participate in play-related activities. Using the existing schools' estate may reduce costs and remove the need to transport children from the school premises to a childcare facility. However, some organisations and some parents have advised that this type of arrangement might mean a very long, 'institutionalised' day for children. If the schools' estate is to be used for SAC activities, then it needs to be used imaginatively, with SAC activities taking place in a more relaxed and informal environment.
9. Concerns were expressed regarding the ability of childminders to provide a service to children with special needs. It was proposed that the Strategy consider making available additional support to enable childminders to provide additional services.

10. With regard to informal childcare—e.g. by family members—it was proposed that training should be made available to family members and other relatives who wished to assist, informally, with childminding duties.
11. The staff to children ratios to which childminders must currently abide were criticised by a number of organisations.

Cost

12. Some respondents proposed that childcare places should receive mainstream funding or be more heavily subsidised by the Government. In particular, many respondents favoured the Scandinavian model of childcare provision and advocated the introduction of something similar here.
13. There was some concern raised by groups such as Employers for Childcare that parents were not accessing in full the financial assistance with childcare costs available to them via working tax credits and vouchers. It was suggested that government take steps to promote, encourage and increase uptake. Employers for Childcare suggested that an information campaign be run to this effect. The Childcare Grant (for students in full time education) was noted by several individuals as an example of effective childcare assistance for parents in education.
14. Some responses proposed that the Government should review funding streams and costs of childcare provision to explore new and innovative ways to maximise quality and sustainability, including during times of fluctuating or lower demand.
15. Responses from childminder organisations suggested that a central database detailing childcare providers, their capacity and current vacancies would be desirable.
16. Clarification was requested by a number of organisations, as well as from individuals, on how the £12 million Executive Childcare Fund might be allocated and also how the money has been spent so far. Some groups working in the sector requested information on whether the money available

from the Fund would be opened up to organisations not currently eligible to bid to the Fund.

17. Responses from childcare facilities were of the view that public funds should be available to assist with training costs. Suggestions included mirroring the local authority funding schemes available in England and Wales, and core funding the requirement for all prospective childminders to attend a pre-registration briefing session.

Available Information

18. The Northern Ireland Childminders' Association proposed that the Strategy should endorse and fund a childminding vacancy service which would make it easier for parents to locate a childminder in their local area. Other responses included a recommendation for an up-to-date, user-friendly database of all childcare providers that could be accessed online and updated regularly to show current vacancies.

Integrated Approach to Childcare

19. Many stakeholder groups, such as Employers for Childcare and PlayBoard, felt that the Childcare Strategy should help to clarify childcare policy, with one single Department taking the lead, and the establishment of an interdepartmental group to drive the Strategy across Government. It was also suggested that all childcare be funded through a central fund.
20. The idea that the Strategy could be used to streamline regulation was also proposed by a number of organisations including NICMA, NICVA and the Childcare Partnerships. The Strategy could integrate education and care into one seamless service for children and young people, including integrating the current dual inspection process for schools that provide wraparound care.

Welfare Reform

21. Welfare Reform was a common theme across a number of responses. It was suggested that childcare should be part of the welfare reform agenda as it was an important part of the infrastructure to assist people to find employment.

One suggestion was that the proportion of childcare costs covered under Universal Credit be increased to 80%. Some respondents advised that the Childcare Strategy needed to acknowledge that children living in poverty do not always live in an area that has high poverty levels and that good quality, affordable childcare should be available to all.

22. Some parents felt that informal carers such as grandparents and friends should be included in the formal system, e.g. should be paid for via tax credits. It was also suggested that they could be provided with better support services, such as support networks on the North American model.
23. There was concern from parents that the impact of welfare reform had not been fully assessed, particularly the effects of the reduction of tax credits on women. One suggestion was that payments for childcare could be based on disposable income, not gross income.

CHILDCARE RESEARCH**Overview**

1. Alongside the consultation process, the Strategic Investment Board (SIB) has been carrying out, on behalf of OFMDFM, research to establish: childcare supply and demand; gaps in provision; current and emerging needs, and options for potential Government intervention in the childcare market. The SIB researchers have participated fully in the consultation process, attending all of the OFMDFM events and many of the sectoral and stakeholder consultations as well. SIB has also met with childcare stakeholder groups to hear their proposals and priorities for the Strategy. As a result, SIB's research to date has been fully informed by the comments and submissions received during consultation, and by sectoral and stakeholder opinion.
2. In addition, OFMDFM has commissioned RSM McClure Watters to carry out surveys of parents and childcare providers to estimate childcare supply and demand, and focus on issues such as cost.
3. The principal emerging findings of this research are as follows.

Sector

4. DHSSPS data indicate that, in 2011/12, there were 5,320 registered childcare providers in Northern Ireland. Childminders accounted for more than three quarters of this total (77%); playgroups, 9%; and day nursery and out of school providers, 6% and 5% respectively. Between them, these providers offered nearly 56,000 childcare places. With some 355,000 children under the age of 15, there is around one registered childcare place for every six children.
5. Childminders accounted for nearly 40% of the 56,000 places and day nurseries and playgroups around 20% each. More than 80 per cent of all provision here is therefore focused on younger, pre-school age groups.

Parents

6. Nearly three quarters of parents surveyed (73%) use childcare, but this is more likely to be informal than formal. Nearly two fifths of parents use some type of formal childcare.
7. The parents surveyed tended to use childcare to enable them to work—64% cited work as their principal reason for using childcare. If the perceived barriers to childcare were removed, parents saw the principal resultant gains as increased ability to work, to work at a higher level of responsibility or output, or to train or study.
8. The main issues affecting parental demand for childcare are availability and affordability. SAC has the highest level of demand in terms of the numbers of parents responding that they require this type of provision. However, the actual number of hours of SAC typically required is quite low—around 5-9 hours per week. As a result, affordability is less of a parental issue for SAC than for other forms of childcare such as day nurseries.
9. Parents perceived childcare-related information as insufficient—44% reported that there was insufficient information on childcare provision and 61% reported that there was insufficient information on available financial assistance.

Providers

10. More than half of all childcare providers (59%) stated that they were not able to provide for children with disabilities. Of those that were able to provide, 68% reported that they did not currently do so.
11. Most providers (71%) reported that the demand for their services had not increased beyond their capacity. Only 11% reported that they had a waiting list (average number waiting, 8); 60% had vacancies. Most providers (89%) not increased capacity over the previous year and most (78%) had no plans to do so over the year ahead.
12. This finding—in effect, that childcare settings tend to have vacancies rather than waiting lists—is contrary to consultation responses and other, similar

evidence, that points to a general shortage of childcare provision. It might mean that there is sufficient provision of some types of childcare (e.g. early years provision) and/or sufficient provision in some areas (e.g. affluent areas or urban areas), with the corollary that other types of provision—SAC, rural provision, provision in disadvantaged areas—remains deficient.

13. The principal support needs identified by providers were: training/staff development; business support and advice; support networks; greater involvement and consultation in local childcare planning.

14. The average weekly cost of childcare varies by type of provision:

	Average weekly cost (£)
Approved home child carer	152
Childminder	112
Creche	110
Playgroup	32
After school club	34
Before school club	8

15. Childminding, which accounts for nearly 40% of all provision here, is relatively expensive. The emerging area of need, SAC (breakfast and after school clubs) is relatively low cost.

BUILDING ON EXISTING POLICIES

1. In developing a Childcare Strategy, it is important **to assess the provision and policies already in place**, and to consider how already successful policies and programmes could be built upon. There are many well-developed policies and services already in place to support good quality childcare. The Executive has already evidenced the high priority it gives to children's care and education through its support for early years, health and education, nursery and school age education, and robust regulation of all aspects of education and care.
2. The Northern Ireland Statistics and Research Agency (NISRA) mid-year population projections suggest that the number of children aged 6 and under is expected to increase by 3% between 2011 and 2018. The number of 4 and 5 year olds (taken as being equivalent to Year 1 & 2 in the primary sector) is expected to increase by 8% from 47,700 in 2011 to 51,300 in 2018.
3. In 2011/12, the Department of Education (DE) provided funded pre-school places for over 23,000 children. For 2012/13 additional statutory places have been approved and additional budget for places in the voluntary/private sector provided to meet demand. The number of pre-school places provided by DE is responsive to need to meet the Programme for Government commitment rather than a static number and is therefore adjusted on an annual basis.

Delivering Social Change

4. In March 2012, the First Minister and the deputy First Minister launched the Programme for Government 2011-15, and the *Delivering Social Change* framework through which Ministers will work together to tackle poverty and social exclusion. In doing so, they made clear that, in tackling cross-cutting social issues, the Executive is moving away from Action Plans which record long lists of existing activities towards targeted actions to achieve smaller numbers of cross-cutting and strategic objectives which can really make a difference and which are additional to existing work.

5. The *Delivering Social Change* framework aims to deliver the following two outcomes:
 - a sustained reduction in poverty and associated issues, across all ages; and:
 - an improvement in children and young people's health, wellbeing and life opportunities.
6. These outcomes are being pursued against a background of tackling child poverty, and in the face of wider factors many of which are outwith the Executive's control, such as global and regional economic restructuring, proposed welfare reforms on the basis of parity with GB and reductions in the Block Grant.
7. The longer term objective of *Delivering Social Change* is to lay the basis for sustained social improvement for children and young people as part of an overall effort to reduce intergenerational poverty. This will entail Ministers working together in common cause and with a longer term view which encompasses the next Comprehensive Spending Review and Programme for Government period, and the years beyond.
8. In moving to a new Strategy, we will seek to build on the best of existing provision. Some of the key policies and services are outlined below.

Childcare Partnerships

9. The Childcare Partnerships in the Health and Social Care Board and Trusts bring together the statutory, community and voluntary sectors with responsibilities for Early Years services, in a spirit of co-operation and partnership and are responsible for implementing Childcare Plans for each Trust area.

Early Years Strategy

10. The consultation process on the Department of Education's *Learning to Learn – A framework for early years education and learning* is now complete and the Minister for Education is currently considering the way forward in light of the responses received, the Delivering Social Change framework, policy developments across government and the current context for education.

Pre-School Education

11. It is also important to recognise the continuing improvements in the Department of Education's pre-school education expansion programme. As set out in the Programme for Government, the Executive is committed to providing a good-quality pre-school education place to all parents who want it, through the pre-school education expansion programme.
12. Pre-school education for children in their final pre-school year before they reach compulsory school age is offered, free of charge to parents, in nursery schools, nursery classes in primary schools and in voluntary and private playgroups and day nurseries. The places are usually part-time (typically two and a half hours per day, five days a week).
13. Whilst pre-school education is not a form of childcare, parents take account of it in the context of their existing childcare patterns or future childcare needs.

Sure Start

14. Sure Start is a targeted programme, which operates in designated areas of disadvantage. Sure Start offers support to parents from pregnancy onwards and aims to give young children under four, from the most disadvantaged areas, the best possible start in life. Sure Start currently operates in at least the 20% most deprived wards and super output areas and provides a range of services focussed on the needs of children, families and communities with an emphasis on promoting the physical, intellectual, social and emotional development of pre-school children to ensure they can flourish at home and when they get to school. Sure Start is delivered by the Department of Education in partnership with the Department of Health, Social Services and

Public Safety and the Health and Social Care Board and Trusts.

15. Sure Start services are provided through a holistic approach, bringing health, education and parenting support services together in a co-ordinated way. Designed and delivered at a local level through a network of local statutory agencies and community-based voluntary organisations, Sure Start brings together aspects of health, early education, child development and family/parenting support. In each local area, different programmes are set up which draw together the range of existing services in line with the particular needs of the community. All Sure Start programmes must include a number of core services which are laid down by policy.
16. All Sure Start projects provide a Developmental Programme for two to three year olds which aims to enhance social and emotional development, build on communication and language skills and encourage imagination through play. Parents are an integral part of the Programme which provides opportunities for learning and development in a small group setting. The learning can then be shared in the home environment. Sure Start can help children to be prepared for starting pre-school education. The Developmental Programme for two to three year olds is not intended to be a universal service for all children in the year before starting pre-school education but is aimed primarily at those children who are likely to benefit most from this support.

Extended Schools

17. The Department of Education's Extended Schools policy enables those schools that draw pupils from the most disadvantaged communities to provide a range of services and programmes to help meet the identified needs of pupils, their families and wider communities. The Extended Schools programme has a clear focus on improving educational outcomes, reducing barriers to learning and providing additional support to help improve the life chances of disadvantaged children and young people.
18. All nursery, primary, special and post primary schools which meet the following criteria are eligible for additional funding designed to deliver extended programmes:-

- 51% or more enrolment drawn from Neighbourhood Areas and/or 30% most deprived wards/super output areas; and/or
 - A Free School Meal Entitlement of 37% or higher or in the case of nursery schools an income-based Job Seekers' Allowance at or above 37%.
19. An effective Extended School works in collaboration and partnership with other neighbouring schools and with a range of statutory, voluntary and community based organisations to offer services and activities which support and motivate children and young people to achieve their full potential. These activities can include:
- Appropriately targeted activities aimed at raising the standard of pupils' achievement;
 - Community access to school facilities;
 - Sign-posting and access to non-formal education opportunities; and
 - Parenting support and lifelong learning opportunities.
20. The primary function of an Extended School must be to raise standards through the provision of targeted support services which have a focus on learning, development and progress. The additional resources are made available to promote, support and sustain the drive to maximise learning and achievement for those children and young people most in need or who are at risk of low educational attainment. This includes those with behavioural, emotional, health needs or other difficulties.
21. As provision extends outside school hours, this can remove or reduce the need for childcare for those children who are involved.

Legislation

22. The Children (Northern Ireland) Order 1995 sets out the law relating to reviews of childminding and day care services and the legislative basis for the registering and inspection of such services.

Economic Strategy

23. The Economic Strategy, published in March 2012, sets out how the Executive plans to grow a prosperous local economy over the short, medium and longer-term to 2030. The Economic Vision for 2030 is:

“An economy characterised by a sustainable and growing private sector, where a greater number of firms compete in global markets and there is growing employment and prosperity for all.”

24. We believe that a Childcare Strategy is consistent with the Strategy’s employability theme and can play a key role in helping to achieve this vision. We believe that by increasing the availability of, and accessibility to, childcare provision, this will allow more parents to work, train or learn, thereby contributing to the local economy.

Pathways to Success Strategy

25. Department for Employment and Learning’s (DEL) Pathways to Success Strategy is aimed at young people not in education, employment or training (NEET). It recognises the benefits of childcare for both parents and children and young people.

Strategy to improve the lives of disabled people – 2012-2015

26. The Executive is currently consulting on a new strategy that would integrate all other policies that impact on the lives of disabled people. Based on the social model of disability, it aims to remove the obstacles to equal participation in society. It aims to address the needs of disabled children and their families as well as the needs of disabled parents both of whom may face additional difficulties, compared with non-disabled, in accessing appropriate childcare.

Financial Assistance

27. Financial assistance to support families is available from a number of different sources. Many working parents can get help with their childcare costs through tax credits or childcare vouchers. Further information is available at <http://www.hmrc.gov.uk/leaflets/wtc5.pdf>.
28. In addition to the above, DEL provides financial support towards childcare costs to a range of eligible individuals (such as lone parents, the partners of certain benefit claimants and young people with childcare responsibilities) on a number of its main programmes and services (e.g. Steps to Work, Training for Success) as well as within Further and Higher Education provision.

Other provision

29. The Department for Social Development has provided significant subsidies for childcare provision in disadvantaged areas through Neighbourhood Renewal activities and to women's centres across the region, to enable more women (and men) to access training and progression.