

Consultation Document on 'Draft Childcare Strategy'.

[Office of the First Minister and Deputy First Minister]

Consultation Response from Fermanagh and Omagh District Council.

Fermanagh and Omagh District Council (Council) welcomes the opportunity to respond to the Office of the First Minister and Deputy First Minister's (OFMDFM) consultation on the 'Draft Childcare Strategy'.

Brief Background for Fermanagh and Omagh District Council

The District Council area is home to 114,992 people (as of 30 June 2014). The District Council area is Northern Ireland's largest region in terms of land mass - approximately 3,000km², or 20% of NI - and the smallest in terms of population. As a result, the population density of approximately 41 people per km² is the sparsest in NI. This is a feature of the region which also provides challenges to service delivery.

Consultation Feedback

Fermanagh and Omagh District Council (Council) welcomes this consultation and in general the pursuit of OFMDFM in the development of the 'Draft Childcare Strategy' with the underpinning aim of providing a 10 year strategy for 'affordable and integrated childcare'.

The Council does have a number of concerns which are outlined below.

Potential Vision

Within OFMDFM's Consultation Documents, it is stated that a 'vision' for the Executive's Childcare Strategy by 2025 is:

'Every child, parent and family will have access to affordable, integrated, quality childcare. Through childcare, we will support the transformation of our society, promoting both equality and social inclusion. We will use childcare as a stepping stone to lifelong achievement, from formal education into adult life. Through childcare, we will instil lifelong respect for diversity. By making affordable childcare services more widely available, we will enable all parents, but especially mothers, to join the workforce. In this way, childcare will contribute to greater gender equality. Finally, by developing local childcare services, we will create childcare jobs and develop the skills of people working in the childcare sector.'

The Council broadly agrees with the above statement. Equality and social inclusion should be promoted from an early age and childcare is an excellent way of beginning this process. The ambition for any Childcare Scheme should revolve around the children and enhancing their development. All emphasis should be on the continuous development of all children. The people involved in the childcare system, either by

employment or volunteering, should be recognised as being critical to achieving the ambitions with regards to the children.

Over the last number of years, (due to various issues such as prices, the economic downturn, etc), many families have found it increasingly difficult to 'make ends meet'. The relatively high price of childcare costs not only placed an additional pressure on limited budgets, but it can also act as a barrier to employment for some 'low income' families and lone parents. Therefore, with this in mind the Childcare Strategy is particularly welcomed.

In some areas of Northern Ireland, and in particular rural areas of the Fermanagh and Omagh District, a good quality, accessible and affordable childcare infrastructure is not available.

For many families within Northern Ireland, finding the right care for their children presents difficulties. These difficulties could take the form of availability, price, suitability, location, amongst many others. The Council is adamant that a choice of high quality childcare is vital for all families, regardless of demographic location or economic standing.

For families, where the parent(s) can, and are able to work, it is essential that affordable and accessible childcare provision does not act as a barrier to this. Childcare provision should make it easier for parent(s) to work leaving them feeling confident in the level/quality of childcare as well as it making financial sense for each individual family.

The Council believes that there are a number of key issues which OFMDFM should pay attention to, regarding the introduction of a Childcare Strategy for Northern Ireland. These issues include:

- Quality of Childcare in Northern Ireland.
- Types of Childcare in Northern Ireland.
- Affordability of Childcare.
- Government schemes to assist families with childcare costs.
- Giving parents more information allowing them to make more informed choices in relation to childcare in Northern Ireland.
- Clear regulation setting out minimum adult to child ratios.

Aims of the Draft Childcare Strategy

The Council supports the key aims within the Draft Childcare Strategy (i.e. Developmental and Employment).

Much research, with regards to Childcare and Early Years, points to the importance of this stage in an individual's development not only throughout their childhood years, but right into adulthood. Indeed the European Commission Communication from 2011, states that: 'Early Childhood Education and Care is the essential

foundation for successful lifelong learning, social integration, personal development and, later on, employability. It complements the central role of the family, having a profound and long-lasting impact which measures taken at a later stage cannot achieve.'

This statement from the European Commission Communication would support and the developmental aim contained within the Draft Childcare Strategy. The Council fully supports this, believing that the earliest years in a child's development are most critical and act as the foundation upon which their social and emotional skills are developed and shaped, as well as influencing how they interact with others.

The Council also supports, in principle, the employment aims contained within the Draft Childcare Strategy, however there are a number of issues particularly for rural communities that the Council would like to highlight for consideration by OFMDFM.

Emerging Objectives

Within the Draft Childcare Strategy there are seven key objectives and these include:

1. Availability
2. Affordability
3. Sustainability
4. Diversity
5. Quality
6. Informed choice for parents
7. Integrated

Whilst these are all important and critical for the success of any Childcare Strategy, three of the above outlined objectives would provide some issues for Childcare within rural areas, particularly within some areas of the Fermanagh and Omagh District. These issues revolve around 'Availability', 'Affordability' and 'Sustainability'.

Research shows that families right across Northern Ireland face many issues when it comes to 'Affordable' childcare. Affordability is one of the largest challenges that families face when it comes to Childcare. The Northern Ireland Childcare Cost Survey for 2014 shows that 48% of the 4,263 respondents (parents) stated that 'childcare costs put them under increased financial pressure'.

The same survey, conducted in 2013 showed that 22% of parents in County Fermanagh and 27% of parents in County Tyrone, were struggling to meet childcare costs on a regular basis. When you look at the fact that 62% (County Fermanagh parents) and 73% (County Tyrone parents) struggle to meet childcare costs at some point during the year, it is clear that 'Affordability' is a major issue for rural areas. (Statistics taken from the NI Childcare Cost Survey 2013).

'Availability' would be another area of concern for those in rural areas. One of the most important aspects of Childcare is that a range of options should be accessible and available to any family that wants to benefit from it.

'Availability' and 'Accessibility' can also be directly linked to flexibility being offered from childcare providers. For parents who work outside normal working hours (for example in the retail, tourism, or healthcare sectors) existing childcare arrangements on offer in rural areas are rarely available or accessible.

It is vital that more flexible childcare services are encouraged, and made available to families who wish to avail of them.

Childcare services have a huge role to play in sustaining rural communities and 'future-proofing' them. Therefore, making sure that childcare is sustainable, available, affordable and accessible within rural communities is a vital component for the Childcare Strategy.

Proposed Interventions in the Childcare Sector

Although, the Council is broadly supportive of the majority of interventions outlined within the Childcare Sector, there are a number of interventions which raise concern.

For example, 'meeting the needs for children aged between 12 and 14 years'. Typically, the needs of childcare for children aged between 12 and 14 years, or secondary school age, are very different to those of primary school aged children. Secondary school children in rural areas (such as in the Fermanagh and Omagh District) will often have to travel much further to attend their school of choice. Some areas such as Garrison and Rosslea, will see children travelling up to 50 miles (round trip) per day. This means that secondary school children may not be able to avail of the typical childcare facilities which are operated in other more urban areas. Therefore, a different type of care, or after schools clubs, would be required for these children - if their parents required it.

Another intervention raised within the Draft Childcare Strategy is the 'Rural Childminding Services Model' which aims to create 1,000 new childminder places in rural parts of Northern Ireland, during the first phase.

The Council supports, the creation of these new places, however other issues which must also be addressed in rural areas, and in some cases are even more important, is the affordability of childminder places, particularly in rural areas.

The Northern Ireland Childcare Cost Survey from 2014 shows that for families with two children in formal childcare, childcare costs were their largest monthly outgoing, even more than the families mortgages (where appropriate).

This is obviously a huge barrier for families with two parents, let alone one parent families who may decide it would be more sustainable and worthwhile for a parent to

stay at home to raise the children. This not only has a knock on effect on the local childcare services but also on the local economy, benefit provision, etc. It is imperative that any new childcare places, as well as existing childcare places, are made more cost-effective for families, particularly those who may be struggling economically.

This is closely linked to the 'Employment' aim of the Draft Childcare Strategy (outlined on page 8), which aims to 'enable parents to join the workforce'. The Northern Ireland Executive needs to make it financially viable for all families to work, and incur the cost of childcare, before this aim can even begin to be met.

Transport

In the consultation document, it is outlined that the Childcare Strategy 'aims to make region-wide, childcare services that are at least as accessible as existing school services'.

With this in mind, transport in rural areas plays a key role in the accessibility to childcare. Many parents in rural areas may have to travel a number of miles to a local childcare facility and it is vital that OFMDFM works in partnership with other departments (i.e. Department of Agriculture and Rural Development) and other transport agencies in order to develop rural transport links.

The Council recommends that the development of transport services in parallel with the development of childcare facilities should form a key role within the first phase of the new strategy.

Flexibility of Childcare Services

The Council would support the provision of more flexible childcare places. This would particularly benefit parents who work in sectors such as retail, tourism and healthcare where the normal working hours are quite often outside the normal 'Monday-Friday, 9.00pm to 5.00pm'.

This must include the development of childcare places which are available earlier/later as some individuals in rural areas may travel a considerable distance to work, as well as some places which are available on weekends and bank holidays.

Communication

One of the key mechanisms to support the Childcare Strategy is communication. This not only would be letting people know that the strategy is being implemented, but also about how the strategy will affect people. Information should be included on the Family Support NI website as well as the development of a media campaign across Northern Ireland.

This could be supplemented by leaflets dropped in to health care centres, childcare centres, and other facilities used by parents.

Conclusion

To conclude, Fermanagh and Omagh District Council welcome OFMDFM's consultation on the 'Draft Childcare Strategy'. Overall, the Council essentially supports the aims outlined in the Draft Childcare Strategy, however has outlined some issues within this response document that OFMDFM should pay additional attention to.

The Council also feels that OFMDFM should ensure that the Strategy is rolled out efficiently and consistently across Northern Ireland, ensuring that those in rural areas (such as many parts of the Fermanagh and Omagh District) are not disadvantaged compared to those in more urban areas.