

Response to Childcare Strategy November 2015

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**WOMEN'S
information**
northern ireland

1 INTRODUCTION

This response has been informed by feedback provided during a consultation event held with women from south Belfast on 3rd November 2015 and hosted by the Women's Information NI (WINI), it is also informed by the membership of the Women's Resource & Development Agency (WRDA) and Children in Northern Ireland (CiNI).

The Women's Resource and Development Agency is a regional organisation operating across Northern Ireland, with a mission to 'advance women's equality and participation in society by working to transform political, economic, social and cultural conditions. The organisation was established in 1983 and continues its focus on working with women and community organisations located in disadvantaged areas. WRDA is a membership organisation with over 190 members comprised of women's groups, organizations and individual members.

Women's Information Northern Ireland is a regional organisation operating across Northern Ireland, to provide quality information to women who live and work in socially disadvantaged areas by building self-confidence and empowering them to undertake their role within the community in a more positive and informed manner.

Children in Northern Ireland are the regional umbrella body for the children's sector in Northern Ireland. CiNI represents the interests of its 160 member organisations providing policy, information, training and participation support services to members in their direct work with and for children and young people. CiNI membership also includes colleagues in the children's statutory sector recognising that the best outcomes for children and young people are increasingly achieved working in partnership with all those who are committed to improving the lives of children and young people in NI.

CiNI together with WRDA jointly chair the Early Years Strategic Alliance (EYSA) which brings together organisations from the child care and women's sector. EYSA seeks to inform and influence early years, child care and family support policy. It seeks to ensure equal access to high quality, child-centred support and services

that meet the holistic needs of younger children and their families. In 2012 EYSA updated its Early Years Manifesto outlining some of the key elements for an early year's strategy. The Manifesto is a road map for the development of early years, childcare and family support services. A copy of the Manifesto can be downloaded from here: <http://www.ci-ni.org.uk/docs/EYSAManifestoFINAL.pdf>.

The Manifesto outlines eight key themes that need to be addressed. The theme of integration and collaboration in early childhood education and care services is EYSA's over-arching objective and provides the foundation upon which all of the Manifesto issues can be addressed.

Other themes include a rights based approach to early childhood; equal access to early years, childcare and family support services for all children; early intervention and prevention in all early years services; quality affordable childcare; promoting young children's right to play; ending child poverty; and early years funding.

Childcare should be considered within the two contexts listed within the strategy: firstly, as contributing to a child's education and development and secondly as an economic issue, to facilitate parents to get in to and stay in work and an opportunity for job creation.

Government have long argued that the best route out of poverty is through paid work. However, in Northern Ireland, there is an absence of a childcare infrastructure to support parents to be able to get into work, education or training.

In the context of welfare reform, the success of universal credit depends upon childcare infrastructure being in place to support parents to find work. Unfortunately Northern Ireland lacks such an infrastructure.

Research conducted by Save the Children shows that many low income mothers are considering leaving work because they can no longer afford childcare.¹ According to research by Employers for Childcare Charitable Group, families in Northern Ireland are paying 44% of their income for childcare for one child, which is the highest

¹ Whitham, G. (2012) 'Ending Child Poverty: Ensuring Universal Credit supports working mums', Save the Children

amount in Europe.² Recent changes to the tax credit systems mean the childcare element of working tax credit has reduced from 80% to 70%.

WRDA, CiNI and WINI support a childcare strategy that deals with the high costs of childcare; increases accessibility of childcare services, and greater information on what is available to help parents. We would particularly welcome a fundamental and long term commitment from the Executive to improving the life chances of children by developing a strategy that covers a period of a child's life from 0 – 21 years of age.

² Dennison, R. and Smith, N. (2012) *Northern Ireland Childcare Cost Survey 2012*, Employers for Childcare

2 KEY CALLS

1. Lead Department

The Minister for the new Communities Department should take lead ministerial responsibility for a fully integrated Childcare Strategy, this must be underpinned by a commitment from all Executive Ministers to co-operate and work in partnership.

2. Funding

Childcare services must be adequately resourced. Any strategy must contain a robust mechanism for tracking spend on childcare services including where funding streams originate and when they are coming to an end. This will ensure continued availability and accessibility of childcare services, particularly for those in disadvantaged areas. See the Women's Centre Childcare Fund which is due to end March 2016.

3. Current budget context

While a large volume of evidence illustrates the positive outcomes for children when investment is targeted during the very early years, it also has to be recognised that some children and families will need additional supports and interventions at different points in a child's life. It is essential that parents and families are informed and supported to provide the best possible care for their children. This must go hand in hand with measures to redress inequalities and barriers for women and families such as poverty, domestic violence, poor mental health, inadequate housing and welfare reform. The Childcare Strategy must make reference to the current context of welfare reform being imposed by Westminster and seek to mitigate any negative impacts upon childcare particularly for women and families in disadvantaged and rural areas.

4. Sustainability

Recent evidence suggests that childcare providers in disadvantaged and rural areas face challenges in terms of remaining sustainable. Childcare provision in disadvantaged and rural areas needs to be publicly funded in one form or another. The extent to which a childcare provider in these areas remains able to provide a service depends largely on the amount of grants or subsidies it is able to attract. Without childcare providers in areas of disadvantage the lack of affordable childcare will continue to be the single biggest barrier to women's participation in work, education and training and public and political life. The Childcare Strategy must recognise this and include funding streams where sustainability is not a pre-requisite.

5. Rebalancing of resources

The evidence demonstrating the high return on investment in the early years is increasingly accepted and acknowledged. However, research evidence highlights the ongoing chronic under investment in childcare and early years provision in Northern Ireland. Even before the welfare and budget cuts, Northern Ireland suffered from historic under-investment in children. Any Childcare Strategy must deliver a re-balancing of resources including sufficient sustained capital investment in areas of social need where there is an identified gap in childcare.

6. Cost of childcare

Childcare provision is one of the main barriers to entering the labour market for parents, particularly so for women. The cost of childcare being arguably one of the biggest problems associated with childcare. In 2014, the cost of a full-time average childcare place was £162 per week. This equates to 44% of the median net weekly earning, a figure which is higher than the OECD average. The high cost of childcare acts as a barrier to parents being able to access provision, to the disadvantage of children. In 2014, 51% of parents

reduced their working hours or left work altogether because of the cost of childcare. High childcare bills place families under significant financial pressure, impacting on overall wellbeing and financial stability. The draft strategy must ensure that it puts in place measures to make childcare affordable, including the urgent promotion of the financial assistance which is available with the cost of childcare.

3 GENDER CONTEXT

The availability of good quality and affordable childcare is an essential building block to progressing women's equality. Societal factors dictate that caring responsibilities fall disproportionately to women. Indeed, research by the Women's Centres Regional Partnership (WCRP)³ identified lack of appropriate childcare as the single biggest barrier to women's participation in education, training and work, as well as public and political life. The report made a number of recommendations including the development of an integrated childcare strategy for Northern Ireland and increased provision of local, high quality, affordable and flexible childcare.⁴

Welfare Reform was announced as part of the Coalition Government's June 2010 Budget and Spending Review. It is deemed to be the 'most radical shake up of the benefits system since the foundation of the welfare state.'⁵

There will be a new integrated benefit called Universal Credit which will replace a number of current in-work and out-of-work benefits; what is currently known as the Disability Living Allowance will be replaced by the Personal Independence Payment as well as amounts of housing benefits being capped. We have yet to experience the full impact of welfare reform; we are therefore disappointed that the strategy

³ H McLaughlin (2009) Women Living in Disadvantaged Communities: Barriers to Participation, Report written on behalf of WCRP, pg 37.

⁴ Ibid, pages 60-61

⁵ Northern Ireland Assembly, Research and Library Service Briefing Paper: An Introduction to Welfare Reform, January 2011.

does not make a strong link between women and childcare and women and welfare reform. This is particularly important in the context of the conditionality for lone parents to be actively seeking work, with 95% of lone parents being women, the need for a childcare infrastructure that supports women to be able to access training and employment is of utmost importance.

Recommendation: The Executive must recognise the link between women and childcare when implementing the Childcare Strategy and include an outcome to promote gender equality.

4 INTEGRATION & COLLABORATION

“Why can’t departments work together more? Why can’t the childcare strategy link with the child poverty strategy? Childcare cannot be dealt with in isolation from all other social issues” Consultee

There continues to be separate strategic initiatives on Childcare and Early Years. April 2006, seen policy responsibility for early years (0-4) transferred from the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety (DHSSPS) to the Department of Education, (DE) with the intention of promoting a more integrated approach to policy and service delivery for children. It wasn’t until June 2010 that a draft 0-6 Early Years Strategy was ready for public consultation, with over 90% of respondents disagreeing with the Early Years Strategy, DE revised the strategy, publishing an Early Learning Framework in December 2012, concentrating solely on education. This was a worrying development, especially due to the lack of actions for children 0-3 outside Sure Start areas. DE’s own Early Years Strategy Evidence Based Paper⁶ states that ‘Early Years in this context includes services for all young children to play, care and learning experiences for children in either voluntary,

⁶ http://www.deni.gov.uk/early_years_evidence_based_paper.pdf

community, statutory or home based settings before compulsory schooling.’ The contradiction between the Evidence Based Paper and the Early Learning Framework is striking and somewhat alarming.

A perfect example of the indivisible nature of having separate strategic initiatives and not working collaboratively is clearly illustrated by childcare not being held with one particular department. Instead it is spread across many, responsibility for the Early Years Strategy (0-6) and Sure Start is held with DE, DHSSPS has responsibility for inspection of childcare settings, OFMDFM responsibility for children and young people and the Department for Social Development (DSD) has responsibility for the Women’s Centres Childcare Fund. It should also be noted that a number of other departments provide funding for childcare settings through various programmes and initiatives.

Due to a lack of integration, collaboration and coherence in Early Years Policy, we believe there are many losers with this scenario. The Government lose out in that when there are parallel systems for early education and childcare, there is a duplication of administration and a waste of very scarce resources, service providers across the sectors lose out because there is a confusing variety of operational procedures, regulatory frameworks, staff training and qualifications, and importantly children and families lose out because they are between two different systems.

Early Childhood Education and Care is the terminology used at European level to describe services that broadly combine education and care in one seamless experience for children and young people. It is the subject of a European Commission Communication published in February 2011, which offers an important policy framework for all EU countries. Some countries make such integrated provision universally available. Others, including the UK, divide early year’s provision by making unhelpful distinctions between ‘education’ and ‘childcare’. This divide is manifest in myriad ways: through different mechanisms for policy, funding and guidance.

The needs of children and young people do not neatly begin and end along the lines of departmental portfolios. There is an urgent need for better collaboration and coordination to improve the manner in which interaction takes place in the lives of children and young people.

The Programme for Government Priority 2: Creating Opportunities, Tackling Disadvantage and Improving Health and Wellbeing clearing sets out within commitment 33 the need for a Childcare Strategy which will ' promote better support for children and parents through a joined-up approach to early years provision; and will seek to provide greater coherence between education and afterschool provision.'

Recommendation: We ask that there is an integrated Childcare Strategy, Early Years Strategy and Child Poverty Strategy dealing with all age ranges.

"Government need to understand that I rely on nursery and school as a means of childcare – I use these as well as my parents so I can work – the Education Department need to understand that most parents use nursery and school in this way." Consultee

5 LEAD RESPONSIBILITY

The challenges faced by Northern Ireland's children and young people, and particularly our most vulnerable children and young people, are complex. Their needs straddle the areas of responsibility of multiple government agencies and therefore require a holistic and combined approach. There is currently a lack of agreement among departments as to who should have overall responsibility for childcare. We strongly believe lead ministerial responsibility for Childcare should be

established without further delay. Our recommendation is that it should rest with the new Department of Communities. However, it is very important this is underpinned and matched by a commitment from all other Departments.

In comparison with the other regions of the UK, Northern Ireland is the only region within the UK that does not have a legislative remit to ensure that parents have access to childcare services. The Childcare Act 2006 operates within England and Wales and Scotland's powers lie within community planning. We are the only region in which there are no clear lines of accountability. That is why we are fully supportive of the Green Party's MLA Steven Agnew, who has set out proposals for a Private Member's Bill that would introduce a statutory duty on all relevant government departments to collaborate in the planning, commission and delivery of services to children in Northern Ireland. We believe this is a welcome development that would have clear mechanisms in place to ensure policies are implemented in a co-ordinated way for the benefit of children and young people.

Encouragingly, at a more local agency level, there is a mechanism — the Children and Young People's Strategic Partnership — that already facilitates integration, collaboration and a cohesive approach to early years. The Children and Young People's Strategic Partnership (CYPSP) set up by the Health and Social Care Board to improve the wellbeing and the realisation of rights of children and young people across Northern Ireland continues to work well. This is the first time that integrated planning and commissioning of supports and services for children and young people have operated at a regional level through a cross-sectoral and multi-agency approach.

Recommendation: We ask that Childcare is placed within the new Department of Communities as a matter of urgency to ensure greater cohesion.

6 AFFORDABILITY OF CHILDCARE

Childcare provision is one of the main barriers to entering the labour market for parents, particularly so for women. The cost of childcare being arguably one of the biggest problems associated with childcare. In 2014, the cost of a full-time average childcare place was £162 per week. This equates to 44% of the median net weekly earning, a figure which is higher than the OECD average. The high cost of childcare acts as a barrier to parents being able to access provision, to the disadvantage of children. In 2014, 51% of parents reduced their working hours or left work altogether because of the cost of childcare. High childcare bills place families under significant financial pressure, impacting on overall wellbeing and financial stability. The draft strategy must ensure that it puts in place measures to make childcare affordable, including the urgent promotion of the financial assistance which is available with the cost of childcare.

Government spending on early education and care has been lacking for many years. We are concerned that the actions and costings of ensuring affordable childcare falls short of the trajectory of spending increases that would be necessary to achieve a truly bold long-term vision of early education and care. Unless a substantive budget is attached to the Childcare Strategy, the ambitious objectives of the strategy may not prove achievable, particularly from the perspective of women's centres in disadvantaged and rural areas who will need guaranteed funding support. We also note that, the strategy omits funding figures.

Every family should be able to afford good quality childcare which is appropriate to their needs. According to Employer's For Childcare latest Childcare Costs Survey, the typical cost of an average full-time place costing £162 per week.⁷ Such costs are unaffordable especially for low-income families. It is important therefore that financial help for parents to afford childcare is incorporated within the strategy.

⁷ Employers for Childcare (2014) Childcare Costs Survey.

We recommend that further consideration must be given to the interaction between vouchers, entitlements to tax credits and statutory benefits. The majority of those taking up childcare vouchers will be women who have on average lower earnings than men and are more at risk of poverty. We recommend that a thorough review of these impacts is undertaken and addressed as part of addressing the high costs of childcare.

"Tax credits are being reduced – leave tax credits and child tax credits alone – or our government need to subsidize free childcare for 0-4 year olds otherwise my daughter will have to leave work."
Consultee

For most families it is not immediately obvious how much subsidy they will receive from the childcare element of the working tax and for mothers who are thinking about returning to work and using formal childcare, working out how much childcare tax credit they will be entitled to be very complex and can discourage them from joining the labour market. This is particularly problematic for lone mothers. Financial support for childcare is too tightly tied to employment and household status. Indeed, by design, the childcare element of the working tax credit can only benefit working families who use formal childcare. This also means that families entitled to this form of financial help are not the poorest. Families with the lowest incomes tend to be those where no adults are working. This means that the childcare tax credit has an impact on child poverty and not an incentive for low-income mothers to work.

Recommendation: The Childcare Strategy must make reference to the current context of welfare reform being imposed by Westminster and seek to mitigate any negative impacts upon childcare particularly for women and families in disadvantaged and rural areas. We also ask that the Barnett consequential associated with the pledge to increase childcare provision for families in England are also committed and applied by the Northern Ireland Executive for families in Northern Ireland.

7 WOMEN'S CENTRES' CHILDCARE FUND

Research has shown that women's centres make a positive contribution to communities and the lives of children living in disadvantaged and rural areas⁸ by promoting equality of access to childcare for women which enables them to participate in social, educational and support programmes. The research also highlighted that the childcare provided for 0-4 year olds enhanced the learning and development of the children as well as developing their skills to prepare them for school.

Recommendation: We need significant investment now within the women's sector. There is substantial evidence to show how effective the women's centres childcare fund is. We need to see this reflected in the Childcare Strategy with a specific fund set up for Women's Centres' from March 2016.

8 AVAILABILITY OF CHILDCARE

Some families in particular find it difficult accessing childcare, such as those located in rural locations or those on zero hour contracts. This can be compounded by lack of suitable transport as well as limited childcare hours. A report by the Rural Childcare Stakeholder Group suggested:

*"The development of multi-functional centres providing for the care and education needs of children and families but also able to meet other needs such as sport, recreation, culture, training information, health and a place for parents and other care givers to meet. Multi-functional centres can be developed in purpose built buildings or in local under-utilised rural primary schools but need to have transport arrangements built in as part of service delivery."*⁹

⁸ Childcare Mapping and Research Report (2010) Women's Centres Regional Partnership

⁹ Rural Childcare Investing in the Future (2007) Rural Childcare Stakeholder Group
http://www.rdc.org.uk/download/files/pub_RuralChildcare.pdf

We would welcome a strategy that deals with the issues faced by parents living in rural areas and those on zero hour contracts by helping in the co-ordination of services such as child-minders, schools and home-based childcare workers. We also recommend that the strategy takes account of informal childcare by family members which also plays an important role. We believe support should be given to family members, such as training as this would make a great difference for many children especially children with disabilities.

Recommendation: The strategy needs to include actions which enable and facilitate easier and greater integration of childcare services in rural settings and also deals with the issue around transport. The strategy also needs to address the issue of flexible childcare for parents who are on zero hour contracts.

9 CHILDCARE FOR CHILDREN WITH DISABILITIES

Children and young people with disabilities are largely invisible in many strategic policy initiatives. They tend to fall between disability services and children's services and therefore their unique and specific circumstances and needs as children with disabilities are often overlooked. This can result in children with disabilities and their families becoming invisible when key decisions are made about establishing the need for, planning and delivering services, including public services.

There are increasing numbers of children with complex health needs now being cared for at home by their families. These children are more likely to experience exclusion from mainstream support services due to the perceived risks and lack of appropriate training for staff in this area. Child care services (early intervention)

and support services for families (respite care, personal assistance) are necessary tools to ensure consistent service provision for children with disabilities.

In 2004, the Promoting Social Inclusion (PSI) Working Group on Disability identified barriers to employment, education, transport, housing, access to information and lifelong learning for children and adults with disabilities and made a series of recommendations.¹⁰ One of the recommendations was:

- Early Years and Family Support: More childcare provision is needed for families with children with disabilities.

This strategy fails to adequately address the issue of childcare for children with disabilities and/or special needs. Research 'Childcare for All?'¹¹ Outlined the challenges the lack of specialised childcare raised for many families. The research outlined that in some cases both parents had to leave employment to care for their children due to the severe lack of available and affordable childcare. 70% of respondents who were not in employment said this was due to caring responsibilities relating to their child(ren) with disabilities and/or special needs. Furthermore, only 34% of these parents used formal childcare provision, which indicates a shortage of specialised, appropriate childcare. Many families relied on informal childcare, such as grandparents and other family members.

The current Childcare Strategy fails to address the problems associated with childcare for children with disabilities. There is an urgent need to invest in training for childcarers to enable them to provide care for children with disabilities and/or special needs.

Recommendation: We recommend that this strategy includes actions that highlight the need for innovative and appropriate childcare services to ensure that children and young people with disabilities get access to high

¹⁰ Promoting Social Inclusion Working Group on Disability (2009), Report of the Promoting Social Inclusion Working Group on Disability, Belfast, OFMDFM

¹¹ Employers for Childcare (2011) Childcare for All

quality childcare they require in the setting of their choosing. A regional training strategy is also required to ensure that staff are confident and competent when delivering childcare and support to children and young people with complex needs. We also wish to see the training element which was addressed in the Early Actions Paper continue.

"My daughter cannot find suitable childcare for her son, he has ADHD, and childcare providers don't have the skills to deal with children who have certain conditions." Consultee

10 RURAL CHILDCARE

Childcare places are traditionally more difficult to find in rural areas. The Northern Ireland Women's Rural Network¹² Manifesto noted that "flexible, affordable, accessible quality childcare is very difficult to find in rural areas. Distance from work means rural women's childcare starts earlier and ends later, up to 2 hours a day more than their urban counterparts. This can make childcare unaffordable and work/life balance unrealistic. The recent economic downturn has also had an impact on grandmothers, who are increasingly required to shoulder greater childcare responsibilities."

As far back as 2008, the Rural Childcare Stakeholder Group published a report on rural childcare. The key problems associated with childcare were accessibility, early years integration, quality, sustainability and affordability, which are often intensified by the specific nature of rural communities.

These are issues which need to be given further specific consideration within the Childcare Strategy. We would also like to see further information on the role of DARD, considering their Review of Rural Childcare which ran between 2009 and 2011. The aim of this project was to inform policy. Just over £1 million of funding was allocated to the programme. During its timeframe over 800 childcare places

¹² Northern Ireland Women's Rural Network (2015): Rural Women's Manifesto

were created and 1485 existing places were safeguarded. Furthermore, almost 200 parents returned to work or accessed training as a result of the funding.

Recommendation: We recommend that the Executive use the evaluation of the Rural Childcare Programme to ensure that rural childcare issues are given due consideration within the strategy.

11 INFORMATION

A reduction in support for families through changes to the tax and benefits system has greatly impacted on families. In particular, the reduction in the amount of support available through the childcare element of working tax credits has been reduced by 10% from April 2011. Therefore raising awareness on what support is available to parents is vital.

We are delighted that the need to provide appropriate information is cited as one of the issues being addressed in the Strategy. Too often parents and carers are unable to make informed decisions on the type of provision that best suits their children's needs. We welcome the acknowledgement in the strategy of this problem and the commitment to improve access to information for parents.

Recommendation: We would like to see information for parents and carers in a variety of languages and formats and recommend that information is improved between different types of providers. Grandparents play an important role in child minding, those attending the consultation event believed that grandparents should be paid and restrictions surrounding the use of childcare vouchers needed to be addressed.

12 FUNDING & SUSTAINABILITY

Children and young people represent the highest leverage point for investments to build human capital and the principal means by which to break the cycles of poverty and deprivation. The opportunity costs of investing in children are lower and the benefits are maximal because they have the longest possible period to accrue.¹³

An amount of £12 million was set aside for the Childcare Fund, the first tranche of funding spent was £322,000 allocated to 3 bids, and a second tranche amounted to £4.5 million over 5 bids. We are concerned that having no allocated budget to this strategy will not proving the best approach to allocating resources where they are most needed.

To ensure the best outcomes overall, investment must be long-term, focused on results and reflect the government's legal obligations under Section 75 of the Northern Ireland Act, the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities and the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child.

Creating better outcomes for children and young people is inextricably linked to the government's vision for a more vibrant society and economy, as well as to its rights-based legal obligations. Spending focused on children and young people represents a critical value statement, as both a commitment to what we value as a society, and as a mechanism to deliver value for money.

Recent evidence suggests¹⁴ that childcare providers in disadvantaged and rural areas face challenges in terms of remaining sustainable. Childcare provision in disadvantaged and rural areas needs to be publicly funded in one form or another. The extent to which a childcare provider in a these areas remains able to provide a service depends largely on the amount of grants or subsidies it is able to attract.

¹³ The World Bank, "Why Invest in Children and Youth," <http://web.worldbank.org/WBSITE/EXTERNAL/TOPICS/EXTCY/0,,contentMDK:20243901~menuPK:565261~pagePK:148956~piPK:216618~theSitePK:396445,00.html>

¹⁴ National Centre for Social Research (2012) https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/219620/DFE-RR246.pdf

Without childcare providers in areas of disadvantage the lack of affordable childcare will continue to be the single biggest barrier to women's participation in work, education and training and public and political life.

Recommendation: We ask that the strategy outlines the budget required and the amount which will be attached to this strategy to allow implementation of the interventions outlined. The Childcare Strategy must also include funding streams where sustainability is not a pre-requisite. We also recommend that the strategy contain a robust mechanism for tracking spend on childcare services including where funding streams originate and when they are coming to an end i.e. the Women's Centres Childcare Fund. This will ensure continued availability and accessibility of childcare services, particularly for those women in disadvantaged and rural areas.

13 CHILDCARE WORKFORCE

A professionally recognised, appropriately paid, suitably trained workforce plays an integral role in ensuring the delivery of high quality early childhood education and care services. A report by the Northern Ireland Taskforce on Employability and Long-Term Unemployed reported that lack of access to affordable and decent quality childcare provision was one of the main barriers to entering the labour market for parents, particularly so for women.¹⁵ Similarly, a report by the Women's Centres Regional Partnership cited childcare as one of the main barriers for women living in disadvantaged areas to participate in work, education and training, and public and political life.

¹⁵ Report of the Taskforce on Employability and Long-Term Unemployed, December 2002.

We are disappointed that the childcare strategy fails to recognise the need for a radical reform of the workforce within the early years' sector.

Recommendation: The strategy must contain a workforce strategy to include a review of qualifications, pay structure and a commitment to a bursary scheme to provide financial support to assist with the costs of undertaking third level education. We require the workforce strategy to be adequately resourced to recognise the experience of staff working in the sector and value the contribution workers make to the lives of children.