

## Childcare and Early Learning

**Early learning is a key factor in determining an individual's life chances, playing a key role in a child's development, and having significant benefits for children most at risk of educational underachievement. It also has an important role in tackling disadvantage and in developing an understanding and respect for diversity.**

The Equality Commission for Northern Ireland urges prompt action to ensure appropriate, accessible and affordable childcare and early-years provision to meet the diverse needs of parents, carers, and children from across the range of equality categories.

Delivering improvements to childcare and early learning has the potential to advance equality of opportunity for parents - particularly mothers, carers and children - including those with a disability and those from minority ethnic backgrounds. While debates often focus on young children, older children including those with disabilities, continue to benefit from access to childcare services into their teenage years.

### ***Recommendations for Childcare and Early Learning***

**Provide appropriate, accessible, flexible and affordable childcare and early-years provision to meet the diverse needs of all children.**

Provision should meet the specific needs for children from across the full range of equality groups, including disabled children, those from minority ethnic communities and new residents (who may not have English as a first language), as well as those from rural communities.

**Promote equality of opportunity for parents / carers, including overcoming barriers to parental employment.**

Provision should promote equality of opportunity for parents and those providing care, to the benefit of wider society and the economy. It should also be sufficiently flexible to take account of the conditions that would facilitate parents, particularly mothers, and carers to better access employment and training. Information on childcare and early-years provision and availability should be easily accessible, including for those who do not speak English as a first language.

## Maximise the quality and sustainability of Childcare and Early Learning services.

Actions must ensure the sustainability of provision, including in disadvantaged and rural areas. The work of providers, predominantly women, should be properly valued and remunerated, with appropriate workforce development opportunities. Consideration should be given to lessons learned from other jurisdictions in relation to ensuring the sustainability of services.

## Tackle gender stereotypes concerning Childcare and Early Learning roles.

Comprehensive measures must tackle gender-based stereotypes and prejudicial attitudes from an early age and across all areas of life. This should include challenging gender stereotypes in relation to women's and men's caring roles – both in the home and in employment, and with regards to the diverse range of family types in Northern Ireland.

## Support and encourage employers to develop carer friendly policy and practices, including maximising flexibility.

Employers and training providers should be supported and encouraged to develop parent / carer friendly policy and practices. Actions should include the promotion of flexible working practices and the equal sharing of family roles / responsibilities between women and men.

### ***Wider Recommendations***

Early intervention must also play an important role in addressing wider inequalities in education – including attainment for Traveller, Roma and Newcomer children; those with Special Educational Needs, and who are Looked After Children. We also highlight the importance of challenging inappropriate stereotypes and prejudice-based bullying at an early age; of supporting parental engagement; and of embedding equality of opportunity and good relations within learning, and within the training of early-years / childcare providers.

Action is also required with regards to better targeting interventions and tracking impacts; collecting and using equality data to inform decision making; in leadership and stakeholder involvement; and in ensuring appropriate investment and resourcing.

This key point brief presents our recommendations in a concise format. For further detail, including our supporting reasoning and evidence base, please visit [www.equalityni.org/childcare](http://www.equalityni.org/childcare) or contact [publicpolicy@equalityni.org](mailto:publicpolicy@equalityni.org)

**February 2024**