

**Equality Commission**

FOR NORTHERN IRELAND

**EQUALITY COMMISSION FOR NORTHERN IRELAND**

# **Childcare and Early Learning - Summary Policy Position Paper**

**SUMMARY: Policy Position Paper**

February 2024

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## Executive Summary

- i. Education, including early learning, is a key factor in determining an individual's life chances. High quality early learning plays a key role in a child's development, and can have significant beneficial impacts for those 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.
- ii. 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.
- iii. 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.
- iv. While debates often focus on childcare for young children, it is important to recognise the importance also to those who may benefit from access to childcare services into their teenage years – including for older children with disabilities.
- v. While recognising the current context, including pressures on available resources, the Commission urges prompt action to advance equality via the provision of appropriate, accessible, flexible and affordable childcare and early learning provision.

### ***Summary of recommendations for Childcare and Early Learning***

- vi. Action is required to:
  - Provide appropriate, accessible, flexible and affordable childcare and early-years provision to meet the diverse needs of all children.
  - Promote equality of opportunity for parents / carers, including overcoming barriers to parental employment.
  - Maximise the quality and sustainability of Childcare and Early Learning services.

- Tackle gender stereotypes concerning Childcare and Early Learning roles.
- Support and encourage employers to develop parent / carer friendly policy and practices, including maximising flexibility.

### ***Wider Recommendations***

- vii. We also consider that there is an opportunity via the provision of childcare and early-years support to take steps in support of addressing wider inequalities in education. Accordingly we recommend action to:
- Address inequalities in attainment and access experienced by Traveller, Roma and Newcomer children;
  - Tackle prejudice-based bullying and challenge stereotypes;
  - Engage with parents / families / carers and the wider communities of key equality groups;
  - Ensure the quality of educational experiences received by children with Special Educational Needs (SEN);
  - Provide tailored support to ensure the effective participation in education of every looked after child;
  - Embed equality of opportunity and good relations within learning;
  - Mainstream equality and good relations issues into the education, training and continuous professional development of early years / childcare providers;
  - Routinely teach children together via a shared curriculum in shared classes, in support of better advancing a shared society:
- viii. 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.
- ix. This summary document presents the Commission's recommendations. For further information, 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)

# 1 **Childcare and Early Learning**

- 1.1 Quality childcare and early learning provision goes beyond merely providing care for a child, providing a vital opportunity to support the learning and development of children across a range of equality groups and disadvantaged backgrounds.
- 1.2 Across this paper we focus on Childcare and Early Learning provision in relation to the wider range of professional caring and early-years services<sup>1</sup> outside of the compulsory education system, from when a child is born to their teenage years.
- 1.3 While debates often focus on the benefits of childcare for young children, their families or the economy, it is important to recognise the importance also to those who may benefit from access to childcare services into teenage years – including for older children with disabilities or Special Educational Needs.
- 1.4 While this paper centres on childcare provision, in Section 6 we summarise a number of our recommendations for education, which have key relevance also to early education.

## ***Early Learning, Childcare and Equality***

- 1.5 Education, including early learning, plays a key role in determining an individual's life chances. The Commission recognises and reinforces the wider value of education, beyond solely the achievement of qualifications.
- 1.6 Even at the earliest stages, education can provide exposure to literature, language, sport, activities, art, and music; as well as allowing individuals to develop an understanding and experience of the value and range of diverse cultures, identities and backgrounds.
- 1.7 High quality early-years provision plays a key role in children's development, and can have significant beneficial impacts for

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<sup>1</sup> A variety of different types of services are available, including childminders and Approved Home Child-carers, pre-schools, day nurseries, playgroups and out-of-school care, and are provided by the private, public and community and voluntary sectors.

those children most at risk of educational underachievement. It also has an important role in tackling disadvantage<sup>2</sup>.

- 1.8 There is a long-standing body of evidence pointing to the importance of effective early-years provision. For example, European Commission research (2012) found that children who attended high quality provision had better performance in school, and better economic and social outcomes in later life<sup>3</sup>. A number of reports from Northern Ireland have<sup>4</sup> highlighted that early interventions are more effective and less complex than later remedial action.
- 1.9 In the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, the loss of access to formal pre-school education had a detrimental impact on children's development that could span across their lifetimes. Those for whom early learning provision has the most significant impact, including children from minority ethnic communities and new residents<sup>11</sup>, and children with disabilities<sup>5</sup>, may feel the impact most acutely.
- 1.10 The Equality Commission has long-standing interests in childcare and early learning provision. In 2013 we published our 'Policy Positions on Childcare'<sup>6</sup>. This work took account of research contracted by the Commission in 2013 on childcare provision in Northern Ireland<sup>7</sup> as well as wider sources, including stakeholder engagement. The research had identified the lack of affordable and appropriate childcare provision and recommended the implementation of a Childcare Strategy. In 2018 (updated 2022) we also published our 'Equality in Education: Policy Recommendations'<sup>8</sup> – including recommendations of relevance to early years.

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<sup>2</sup> Employers for Childcare and JRF (2024) [Tackling disadvantage through childcare in Northern Ireland](#)

<sup>3</sup> EU High Level Group of Experts on Literacy (2012) Final Report

<sup>4</sup> For example, Purvis, D., (2011) [Educational disadvantage and the Protestant Working Class, A Call to Action](#), p 7; PUP (2015) Firm Foundations, [Educational Underachievement and the Protestant Working Class Education: Getting it right for every child](#); Save the Children (2013) [Too Young to Fail, Closing the educational achievement gap in NI](#); DE (2017) [A compendium of evidence on ethnic minority resilience to the effects of deprivation on attainment](#)

<sup>5</sup> DE (2015) [Study of Early Education and Development: meeting the needs of children with special educational needs and disabilities in the early years](#), page 11

<sup>6</sup> ECNI (2013) [Policy Positions on Childcare](#)

<sup>7</sup> McQuaid, R., Graham, H. and Shapira, M (2013) [Child care: Maximising the economic participation of women](#), ECNI.

<sup>8</sup> ECNI (2018) ['Equality in Education: Policy Recommendations'](#). See also [www.equalityni.org/education/policy](http://www.equalityni.org/education/policy)

- 1.11 For over a decade, the Commission has called<sup>9</sup> for effective childcare and early learning provision that ensures appropriate, accessible, flexible and affordable childcare that promotes equality of opportunity not only for the child, but also for parents and carers, to the benefit of wider society and the economy.
- 1.12 We have set out that such action should ensure that childcare and early learning provision meets the diverse needs of children and families from across the equality groups – including for disabled children, children from minority ethnic communities and new residents, and those from rural communities.
- 1.13 We have also reinforced the importance of tackling gender stereotypes relating to parenting and childcare roles; as well as the need to encourage positive attitudes to childcare; and remove barriers to parental employment.
- 1.14 While recognising the current economic context, including pressures on available resources, there remains a need for prompt action if economic policy goals are to be attained, and if inequalities are to be tackled. Childcare and early learning provision must meet the diverse needs of children, families, employers, service providers and the wider economy.
- 1.15 We urge the earliest prioritisation of actions that will extend appropriate, accessible, flexible and affordable childcare and early learning provision to advance equality for children, parents, carers and families – to the benefit of wider society and the economy.
- 1.16 We also highlight our broader recommendations in relation to education, many of which will be relevant to decision makers when considering early education. For further information, see section 6 of this paper.

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<sup>9</sup> For example: [Recommendations for a Programme for Government \(PfG\)](#) (2022); [Childcare and COVID-19](#) (2020); [COVID-19 and Education: Equality Considerations](#) (2020); [Equality in Education: Policy Recommendations](#) (2018); [Gender Equality: Policy Priorities and Recommendations](#) (2016); [Response to NI Executive's consultation on a draft Childcare Strategy 2015- 2025](#) (2015)

## 2 **Childcare and early years provision to meet the diverse needs of all children in Northern Ireland**

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

- 2.1 Childcare and early learning must be appropriate, accessible, flexible and affordable to meet the diverse needs of children across Northern Ireland.
- 2.2 Provision should be such so as to 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.
- 2.3 Decision-makers should monitor uptake of provision across the equality grounds, and ensure our services reflect international best practice, taking account of lessons from provision in Great Britain, Ireland or wider relevant jurisdictions in relation to schemes to improve access to Childcare and Early Learning<sup>10</sup>.

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<sup>10</sup> For example [The Access and Inclusion Model Homepage - Access and Inclusion Model \(aim.gov.ie\)](https://aim.gov.ie). This scheme provides general and targeted support to all preschools to improve inclusivity and improve access for SEND, with plans for expansion to cover all childcare.

### **3 Childcare and early years provision to meet the diverse needs of parents / carers and wider society.**

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

- 3.1 Alongside providing for the child, childcare and early learning provision should promote equality of opportunity for parents and those providing care, to the benefit of wider society and the economy.
- 3.2 Provision in Northern Ireland should be sufficiently flexible to take account of the conditions that would facilitate parents, particularly mothers, and carers to better access employment and training.
- 3.3 In particular, the Commission calls for urgent action to address shortfalls in provision of childcare for children under school-age, and to ensure sufficient provision before and after the school day, that alongside providing for the child, might facilitate wider economic participation of parents / carers, including for those with older children with a disability.
- 3.4 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 quality and sustainability of childcare and early learning services.

- 3.5 We recommend actions to ensure the sustainability of provision, including childcare services in disadvantaged and rural areas. Reflecting the key role of childcare and early learning in children's development, the work of providers, predominantly women, should be properly valued and remunerated, with appropriate workforce development opportunities.
- 3.6 Government should review the revenue streams and costs of childcare and early learning provision, and explore innovative ways of developing and supporting providers to maximise the quality and sustainability of provision, including during times of fluctuating or lower demand, and for children with specific needs.
- 3.7 Government should be mindful of the different types of childcare and early learning provision in Northern Ireland, including childminders and Approved Home Child-carers, day nurseries, playgroups and out-of-school care.
- 3.8 Consideration should be given to lessons learned from other jurisdictions in relation to ensuring the sustainability of services.

## 4 Overcoming barriers to employment

### Tackle gender stereotypes concerning childcare and early learning roles.

- 4.1 The Commission recommends coordinated, comprehensive and coherent measures to tackle gender-based stereotypes and prejudicial attitudes from an early age and across all areas of life.
- 4.2 This should include challenging gender stereotypes in relation to women's and men's caring roles – both in the home and in employment. When considering gender stereotypes in relation

to childcare, consideration should be given to the diverse range of family types in Northern Ireland.

- 4.3 There is need for acceptance and recognition of a greater emphasis on both women and men taking childcare responsibility (including parental leave) and building appropriate, accessible, flexible and affordable childcare and early-years provision around this.
- 4.4 There is a need also to address the lack of diversity of those working in childcare and early education, particularly the low numbers of males in this profession.

**Support and encourage employers to develop parent / carer friendly policy and practices, including maximising flexibility.**

- 4.5 Employers and training providers should be supported and encouraged to develop parent / carer friendly policy and practices.
- 4.6 Actions should include the promotion of flexible working practices and the equal sharing of family roles / responsibilities between women and men.
- 4.7 Provision should take account of the conditions that would facilitate parents and those providing care – to enter, remain in, progress in and return to work or training.

## **5 Wider Education Recommendations**

- 5.1 The Commission has identified a number of areas where targeted action could serve to address key inequalities, and advance equality of opportunity and good relations in education.
- 5.2 Recommendations that are of most relevance to childcare and early learning provision include:

- Address inequalities in attainment and access experienced by Traveller, Roma and Newcomer children;
- Tackle Prejudice-Based Bullying and Challenge Stereotypes;
- Engage with parents / families / carers and the wider communities of key equality groups;
- Government should ensure the quality of educational experiences received by children with special educational needs (SEN) in Northern Ireland;
- The Departments of Education and Health should provide tailored support to ensure the effective participation in education of every looked after child;
- Comprehensive action should be taken by the Department of Education, schools and other education providers to embed equality of opportunity and good relations within learning;
- Mainstream equality and good relations issues into the education, training and continuous professional development of early years / childcare providers;
- Move to a system of education which routinely teaches children together via a shared curriculum in shared classes, in support of better advancing a shared society

5.3 For further information on our policy priorities recommendations relating to education, please see [www.equalityni.org/Education/Policy](http://www.equalityni.org/Education/Policy)

## **6 Cross-cutting Recommendations**

6.1 There is also a need for action to address a number of recommendations that the Commission considers important to see implemented across a range of Government strategies, programmes and plans.

- Targeting Interventions, Tracking Impacts: All key measures of Government should not only be tracked in aggregate but also for the impact on individuals from

across the full range of equality grounds. Providing comprehensive equality metrics for all key measures will assist equality considerations to be a core component of public policy design and delivery, facilitating the fuller targeting and delivery of interventions, including for the full range of equality groups.

- Equality Data: There is a need for Government and Public Authorities to collect and share comprehensive equality data to underpin the targeting of interventions and tracking of equality impacts. Key Government datasets should contain comprehensive equality data to facilitate full equality analysis. There is also a need to address gaps in the equality data held within key government datasets and to make this information accessible to a wide range of decision makers and stakeholders.
- Leadership: There is a need for leadership at all levels on equality issues. Leadership must promote positive attitudes, challenge stereotypes and discrimination and ensure that options to advance equality are considered at the earliest point, and across the lifecycle, of all policy development and delivery.
- Stakeholder Involvement: There is a need for full and routine stakeholder involvement and co-design. Government and Departments must fully and routinely involve key stakeholders in the design, delivery and review of law and public policy, so as to benefit from their expertise and experience.
- Resources: There is a need for SMART, time-bound and resourced action plans as a basis for effective, on-time and prioritised delivery. Stakeholder organisations and the Equality Commission must also be properly resourced to support individuals, organisations, and Government / Departments to better shape and assist delivery of the Programme for Government towards advancing equality of opportunity and good relations.

## 7 Conclusion

- 7.1 There are considerable opportunities to further equality of opportunity through improving childcare and early learning provision in Northern Ireland.
- 7.2 High quality early-years provision can have significant beneficial impacts for children, including those from particular equality groups.
- 7.3 The Commission considers that alongside providing for the child, childcare and early-years provision should also seek to promote equality of opportunity for parents and carers, to the benefit of families, wider society and the economy.
- 7.4 We recommend action to:
- Provide appropriate, accessible, flexible and affordable childcare and early-years provision to meet the diverse needs of all children.
  - Promote equality of opportunity for parents / carers, including overcoming barriers to parental employment.
  - Maximise the quality and sustainability of childcare and early learning services.
  - Tackle gender stereotypes concerning childcare and early learning roles.
  - Support and encourage employers to develop parent / carer friendly policy and practices, including maximising flexibility.
- 7.5 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.

- 7.6 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.
- 7.7 We have, and will continue to, proactively engage with a wide range of key stakeholders to call for change to advance equality of opportunity.
- 7.8 In support of securing change, we would welcome any steps you could take to raise awareness of these recommendations and their supporting evidence base. We encourage you to engage with elected representatives, key government officials and other decision makers to call for the adoption of these proposals.
- 7.9 For further information, please visit [www.equalityni.org/childcare](http://www.equalityni.org/childcare) or contact [publicpolicy@equalityni.org](mailto:publicpolicy@equalityni.org)