



EQUALITY COMMISSION FOR NORTHERN IRELAND

SUMMARY: Policy Positions on Childcare: Maximising the Economic Participation of those with childcare responsibilities.

March 2013

1 Background

- 1.1 In 2008, the Commission's shadow report on the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW), stated that "*Over 32 years since the inception of the Sex Discrimination Order (1976), having caring responsibilities for children, disabled people and/or older people still has a critical impact on women's experience of gender equality in Northern Ireland*"¹. The Report made specific recommendations that the number of childcare places in Northern Ireland be increased and that places be responsive to need in taking account of the evening and weekend working patterns of women, and in relation to cost and availability.
- 1.2 On 20 February 2013, the Commission published an expert paper, "Childcare: Maximising the Economic Participation of Women"² intended to inform the development of childcare provision in Northern Ireland.

2 Policy Recommendations: Childcare in Northern Ireland

- 2.1 The Commission considers that appropriate, accessible and affordable childcare provision in Northern Ireland should, alongside providing for the child, additionally seek to promote equality of opportunity for parents and benefit wider society and the economy.
- 2.2 While the current economic climate will inevitably mean that budgets will be constrained, resources will need to be deployed in a range of areas, including childcare, if economic policy goals are to be attained, and if gender inequalities in employment are to be tackled.

¹ ECNI (2008). CEDAW Report: United Nations Convention on the Elimination of all forms of Discrimination against Women. ECNI: Belfast. <http://www2.ohchr.org/english/bodies/cedaw/docs/ngos/ECNIUK41.pdf>

² McQuaid, R., Graham, H., Shapira, M., (2013), *Childcare: Maximising the Economic Participation of Women*, Equality Commission for Northern Ireland. A summary of the research can be downloaded from <http://www.equalityni.org/ECNI/media/ECNI/Publications/Delivering%20Equality/MaximisingChildCareSummary2013.pdf>

While additional resources may be required in some areas, a more integrated and cross-departmental approach may serve to deliver others.

2.3

The Commission has the following key policy recommendations:

- appropriate, accessible and affordable childcare provision to meet the needs of all children – including disabled children, children from BME communities and new residents, and those from rural communities.
- urgent action to address shortfalls in provision of childcare for the under 2's and for before and after school activities that alongside providing for the child, might facilitate wider economic participation.
- Government to review the revenue streams and costs of childcare provision, and explore innovative ways of developing and supporting childcare to maximise the quality and sustainability of provision, including during times of fluctuating or lower demand.
- continued and increased efforts to maximise the flexibility offered by employers and to tackle gender stereotypes concerning childcare roles – both in employment and in society - to promote greater employment equality.
- childcare provision to take account of the conditions that would facilitate parents to enhance their employability skills, return to work and/or maximise their contribution to the economy.
- a single Department to be given lead responsibility for the development and implementation of comprehensive childcare provision. This role must extend beyond coordination and should ensure that childcare delivers appropriate, accessible and affordable provision for a range of stakeholders, across the remit of a range of Government Departments.
- that responses to the December 2012 OFMDFM Consultation 'Towards a Childcare Strategy' are used to inform subsequent consultation once clear policy options have been developed, and that OFMDFM utilises the current opportunities, including engagement with stakeholders and other Government Departments, to collect relevant data/evidence to develop clear policy options and inform screening and any subsequent equality impact assessment of the policy proposals.