



<b>Subject:</b>	Draft NI Executive Early Learning and Childcare Strategy
<b>Date:</b>	20 March 2026
<b>Reporting Officer:</b>	John Tully, Director City and Organisational Strategy
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**Restricted Reports**

Is this report restricted? Yes  No

Please indicate the description, as listed in Schedule 6, of the exempt information by virtue of which the council has deemed this report restricted.

Insert number

1. Information relating to any individual
2. Information likely to reveal the identity of an individual
3. Information relating to the financial or business affairs of any particular person (including the council holding that information)
4. Information in connection with any labour relations matter
5. Information in relation to which a claim to legal professional privilege could be maintained
6. Information showing that the council proposes to (a) to give a notice imposing restrictions on a person; or (b) to make an order or direction
7. Information on any action in relation to the prevention, investigation or prosecution of crime

If Yes, when will the report become unrestricted?

After Committee Decision	<input type="checkbox"/>
After Council Decision	<input type="checkbox"/>
Sometime in the future	<input type="checkbox"/>
Never	<input type="checkbox"/>

**Call-in**

Is the decision eligible for Call-in? Yes  No

<b>1.0</b>	<b>Purpose of Report/Summary of Main Issues</b>
1.1	The purpose of this report is to inform members about the public consultation on the <a href="#">Draft NI Executive Early Learning and Childcare (ELC) Strategy</a> .

<b>2.0</b>	<b>Recommendation</b>
2.1	<p>The Committee is requested to:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>I. Note that the Department of Education is seeking views on the draft NI Executive Early Learning and Childcare Strategy (ELC).</li> <li>II. Approve the draft consultation response (Appendix 1) to be submitted by Belfast City Council to the public consultation. Given the deadline for submission of responses is 24 March 2026, SP&amp;R Committee is asked to give delegated authority to officers to submit the agreed response noting that it is subject to full Council ratification on 01 April 2026.</li> </ol>
<b>3.0</b>	<b>Main Report</b>
3.1	<p><b>Background</b></p> <p>The draft ELC Strategy is the Executive’s draft plan for more affordable, accessible, high-quality early learning and childcare. The strategy is a comprehensive and ambitious framework designed to transform early years provision. It reflects a joined-up approach across departments and communities, recognising the critical role of early years in shaping lifelong outcomes. The draft strategy builds on work already undertaken to enhance early learning and childcare provision across the region and seeks to consolidate and expand on these achievements. The strategy is structured around three core themes which together seek to provide a holistic approach to improving early learning and childcare provision.</p> <p>The PfG 2024-2027 ‘Our Plan: Doing What Matters Most’ includes a commitment to <i>“provide more affordable, accessible, high-quality early learning and childcare opportunities to support children’s development and ease financial pressures for working families. This must complement existing support available through Universal Credit and Tax-Free Childcare (TFC). We also need to ensure that our childcare sector is stable and sustainable.”</i></p> <p>The draft strategy is the Executive’s plan for delivering on this commitment. Achieving the objectives set out in the strategy will require input from a range of departments. It will also contribute to a range of policy priorities through increased labour force participation and economic growth, poverty reduction, gender equality and social mobility.</p>
3.2	<p><b>Notice of Motion</b></p> <p>A Notice of Motion was raised by Cllr Mal O’Hara in 2018 stating “This council agrees to explore options and take practical steps, including through the Belfast Agenda and City Deal, with a view to creating a childcare strategy for the city that will encourage greater maternal employment, redress gender inequalities in the workplace, increase GVA in the city and, most importantly, improve educational and social outcomes for our children.”</p>
3.3	<p><b>Belfast Agenda</b></p> <p>The core objectives of the draft ELC Strategy are aligned to the ‘call to action’ outlined in the Belfast Agenda, seeking partners to provide collective leadership to the delivery of a Childcare Strategy which would aim to deliver extended, affordable and high-quality provision of early education and care initiatives for families with children aged three to four (Belfast Agenda, p.10).</p>
3.4	<p><b>Core Themes and Outcomes</b></p> <p>The strategy is structured around three themes with associated outcomes and objectives which together seek to provide a holistic approach to improving early learning and childcare provision.</p>

### **Theme 1: Supporting Children in Their Early Years**

This theme focuses on what the strategy will deliver for children. It concentrates on improving ELC experiences through expansion and enhancement of provision, the promotion of high quality ELC environments and targeted support for those facing disadvantage and those with additional needs.

#### **Outcome**

All children get the developmental support needed in their early years to ensure the best start in life, including those facing disadvantage.

#### **Objectives**

- 1.1 Provide 22.5 hours pre-school education per week for children in their target preschool year.
- 1.2 Expand services for children facing disadvantage.
- 1.3 Expand developmental provision for children aged 2–3 (in their pre-pre-school year).
- 1.4 Promote high-quality provision across all ELC providers.

### **Theme 2: Supporting Families with their Children’s Learning and Childcare Costs**

This theme focuses on what the strategy will do for families and carers. It seeks to make childcare more affordable and ensure better availability and accessibility of support and information, empowering parents to make the best choices for themselves and their family.

#### **Outcomes**

Families can access more affordable childcare that meets their needs.

Families are better equipped to understand and support their child’s learning.

#### **Objectives**

- 2.1 Make childcare more affordable.
- 2.2 Improve the information and support available for families.

### **Theme 3: Supporting the Early Years Sector and Workforce**

This theme sets out the vital role of the ELC sector and workforce in delivering change. It focuses on improving sustainability and building capacity, while promoting fair pay and professional recognition.

#### **Outcomes**

A more stable and sustainable ELC sector with a highly trained and valued workforce.

More inclusive and accessible early years provision for children with additional needs.

#### **Objectives**

- 3.1 Build the sustainability and capacity of the ELC sector.
- 3.2 Enhance accessible ELC for children with additional needs.
- 3.3 Enhance the early years infrastructure through a skilled and valued workforce.

3.5

### **Implementation Timeframe and Financial Investment**

85 actions within the draft strategy have been categorised into three groups: those commenced in the past 2 years for which £80m funding has already been provided by the

	<p>Executive (Category 1), those proposed to do next (over the 4-year period April 2026 to March 2030) (Category 2) and those which may take longer to implement (currently scheduled from April 2030 to March 2034) (Category 3). It will require significant additional investment to deliver the proposed actions with an estimated requirement of £500m to deliver those actions programmed for the next four years (April 2026 to March 2030). Costs would be recurring and increase in future years to sustain progress. Additional budget would be required to implement the longer-term proposals.</p> <p>An Implementation Plan for category 2 actions, up to April 2030, will be produced once the consultation on the draft strategy is completed, and a budget has been agreed by the Executive. This will detail the actions which will be taken forward under each objective, Key Performance Indicators (KPIs), delivery partners, timescale and estimated costs. A Progress Report will be published by DE and presented to the Executive on an annual basis from the commencement of implementation.</p>
3.6	<p><b>New initiatives and commitments</b></p> <p>The strategy aspires to subsidise over 50% of childcare costs for working families by April 2032 as well as provide universal full-time pre-school education, strongly positioning Northern Ireland amongst the leading international models of support. It will also see the introduction of an Early Years Curriculum Framework to promote consistent content and pedagogy across early years and childcare providers and there is a longer-term objective to expand developmental provision to all 2–3-year-olds.</p> <p>Alongside these new initiatives, there are commitments to invest in core services and provide a more stable funding environment for existing early years programmes. There are specific initiatives for children with special educational needs and/or disabilities (SEN/D) and a plan to strengthen the childcare workforce, both centre-based provision and home-based childminders.</p>
3.7	<p><b>BCC Draft Consultation Response</b></p> <p>The draft response, attached at <b>Appendix 1</b>, welcomes the draft Early Learning and Childcare Strategy and endorses the objectives and actions outlined to deliver more affordable, accessible, high-quality early learning and childcare.</p> <p><b>Theme 1</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Supportive of extending funded pre-school places on basis of 22.5 hours per week to support child development outcomes and parental employment. However, the model fails to adequately support parents who work full-time hours, atypical hours, and lone parents and may risk reinforcing gender inequality in the labour market. Furthermore, access to places alone will not ensure uptake; targeted support will be required particularly in disadvantaged communities where families may lack confidence or trust in formal systems.</li> <li>• The action to remove the legislative requirement to prioritise children from socially disadvantaged backgrounds when applying for funded pre-school places is concerning and should be reconsidered. It risks diluting targeted access for those who would benefit from it the most.</li> <li>• Restricting funded provision to one pre-school year misses an opportunity to support labour market participation earlier and maximise the opportunity to keep parents (predominantly women) in work.</li> <li>• Supportive of actions to expand services for children facing disadvantage and children with additional needs. The inclusion of child poverty indicators could be considered as part of the assessment of where additional Sure Start provision should be concentrated.</li> </ul>

- Supportive of actions to extend developmental provision for children aged 2-3 (in their pre-school year) and the prioritisation of children facing disadvantage and those with additional needs.
- Supportive of actions to promote high-quality provision across all early learning and childcare providers. However, there is a lack of detail on how these proposals will be implemented.
- Consideration should be given to capital funding to enable the physical expansion of Irish Medium and Pre-School infrastructure to meet growing demand of children and families who use Irish as their first language.
- BCC's Irish Medium Employment Academies are ideally placed to meet the rapid growth of the Irish Medium education sector.

## **Theme 2**

- The actions to make childcare more affordable are welcomed however the proposed subsidy scheme could be further enhanced with planned increases introduced earlier.
- Reducing childcare costs is fundamental to inclusive economic growth, particularly for women and lone parents' labour market participation.
- While the proposed policy identifies average daily childcare fees and trends over time, it does not explore regional cost variations and demand levels. The Belfast average monthly childcare cost is 28% higher than the NI median of £225.
- Focus on enhancing information provision to families is to be welcomed. The needs of those who may face additional barriers should be considered when designing systems and digital platforms to ensure inclusion and accessibility.

## **Theme 3**

- Actions to build the sustainability and capacity of the ELC sector are strongly supported and will be critical to delivering the wider ambitions of the strategy. Over the last eight years Belfast City Council have successfully delivered several employment academies and upskilling in relation to childcare including, classroom assistants, SEN, Irish Medium, Deaf people and people with hearing loss and welcome opportunities to further invest in this area.
- Actions to enhance accessible early learning and childcare for children with additional needs are to be welcomed. However, there is no specific reference to deaf children or sign language development. Evidence suggests that a deaf child will benefit from sign language learning from an early age.
- Approved Home Childcare should be promoted more widely particularly to families with children with special educational needs and/or disabilities (SEN/D) and to those who work atypical hours who find it more challenging to find mainstream settings that meet their children's needs.
- The Draft Sign Language Bill for NI has a clause (Clause no 2.2 (b)) for free sign language classes for deaf children and young people. Public authorities who work with families with deaf children and young people will have a statutory duty to provide sign language support and classes. The ELC Strategy would benefit by including this as an additional action. The Bill is expected to become law later this year.
- The actions listed to ensure the workforce are skilled and valued are strongly supported. Offering better pay, free training and a full career pathway from entry level to level 5 would help incentivise childcare as a viable career path and address systemic recruitment and retention issues. Ensuring all staff employed by ELC providers funded by Government are

	paid the Real Living Wage strongly aligns with Belfast City Council's commitment as an employer and procurer and with our Belfast Business Promise Charter.
	<b>Financial and Resource Implications</b>
3.8	There are no direct implications associated with this report.
	<b>Equality or Good Relations Implications</b>
3.9	<p>The implementation of the draft ELC strategy presents a significant opportunity to further promote equality of opportunity and good relations across many Section 75 grounds, and to tackle some of the evident inequalities that continue to persist. While the EQIA appropriately presents the relevant data and highlights some potential impacts, there is opportunity to enhance its value by drawing out potential adverse impacts associated with some actions – specifically that identified in 1.1: proposal to remove the statutory requirement to prioritise children from socially disadvantaged backgrounds when applying for funded pre-school places. Monitoring and evaluation frameworks should incorporate the means to disaggregate data (both quantitative and qualitative) by Section 75 considerations during implementation.</p> <p>There are no direct implications associated with this report.</p>
3.10	<p><b>Rural Needs Assessment</b></p> <p>The Rural Needs Assessment acknowledges that rural areas can face unique challenges in accessing ELC services, including limited availability of registered providers, longer travel distances to existing settings, and fewer subsidised places compared to urban centres. These barriers may result in reduced participation in early education, increased reliance on informal or unregistered care, and constrained employment opportunities for parents—particularly women. The strategy seeks to improve access to early learning and childcare (ELC) services in rural areas by addressing the core barriers of accessibility, affordability, and quality.</p> <p>There are no direct implications associated with this report.</p>
3.11	<p><b>Child Rights Impact Assessment</b></p> <p>The ELC Strategy is expected to have a broadly positive impact on children and young people's rights, particularly in relation to:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Article 6 (right to life, survival and development),</li> <li>• Article 18 (support for working parents),</li> <li>• Article 23 (children with a disability)</li> <li>• Article 27 (adequate standard of living), and</li> <li>• Article 28 (right to education).</li> <li>• Article 31 (leisure, play and culture)</li> </ul> <p>The strategy aims to reduce inequalities by improving access to affordable, high-quality ELC, with targeted support for disadvantaged groups including children from low-income families, those with SEN/D, and newcomer or minority ethnic communities.</p> <p>There are no direct implications associated with this report.</p>
<b>4.0</b>	<b>Appendices – Documents Attached</b>
	Appendix 1: Belfast City Council Draft Consultation Response