



# Consultation on the Draft Northern Ireland Executive Early Learning and Childcare Strategy

## Overview

On 27 February 2025 the Northern Ireland Executive agreed the *Programme for Government (PfG) 2024-2027 'Our Plan: Doing What Matters Most'*.

The PfG includes a commitment to ***“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. We also need to ensure that our childcare sector is stable and sustainable”***.

By the end of this mandate, the aim is to ***“have a comprehensive Executive agreed Early Learning and Childcare Strategy in place, delivering improved outcomes for children and parents”***.

This draft Strategy is the Executive’s plan for delivering on that commitment.

Why your views matter

**We encourage you to complete the online survey.**

- We advise that you read the accompanying consultation documents prior to completing the online survey.
- If you have any accessibility needs, please contact the Early Years and Childcare Team at [elc@education-ni.gov.uk](mailto:elc@education-ni.gov.uk).
- Your feedback will play a vital role in shaping the final strategy and ensuring it delivers better outcomes for children and families in the coming years.

**Please note this consultation closes on 24 March 2026**

# THEME 1: Supporting children in their early years



## Outcome:

- All children get the developmental support needed in their early years to achieve their full potential, including those facing disadvantage or with additional needs

## Objective 1.1: Provide 22.5 hours per week through the pre-school education programme for children in their target pre-school year.

<b>Actions already underway (April 2024 to March 2026)</b>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• By March 2026, approve an additional 4,700 full-time (22.5 hours per week) funded pre-school education places with a free school meal for eligible children, meaning that half of all funded preschool education places in all areas across Northern Ireland will be provided on a full-time (22.5 hours per week) basis by September 2026.</li><li>• Implement a revised funding model for non-statutory pre-school education provision that includes paid release time for planning, administration, training and Early Years Specialist support, full staffing costs and overheads.</li></ul>
<b>Actions that will be prioritised next subject to available resources (April 2026 to March 2030)</b>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• In September 2026, consult on legislative changes to remove the current statutory admissions criteria prioritising children from socially disadvantaged circumstances when applying for funded pre-school education places.</li><li>• By September 2029, approve 75% funded pre-school places across Northern Ireland on a full-time (22.5 hours per week) basis.</li></ul>
<b>Actions that may take longer to implement (April 2030 to March 2034)</b>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Continue to progress Pre-School standardisation, with the aim to provide a funded full-time pre-school education place for all target aged children whose parents want it.</li><li>• Make legislative changes, subject to consultation, to amend the age range for funded statutory pre-school provision, removing the current requirement to enrol children in their penultimate preschool year</li></ul>

## Question 1. To what extent do you agree or disagree with Objective 1.1 and its associated actions?

Please select only one item

- Strongly Agree
- Agree
- Neither Agree nor Disagree
- Disagree
- Strongly Disagree

Do you have any other comments to make on Objective 1.1 and its associated actions?

The expansion of funded pre-school provision on the basis of 22.5 hours per week is positive. This should benefit child development outcomes, enhance inclusion and accessibility, and support parental employment. This can be seen to contribute to inclusive growth and poverty reduction (including in-work poverty) by reducing structural barriers faced by low-income families, and particularly women who are acknowledged as being the predominant providers of unpaid care in society. To ensure uptake of places, particularly in disadvantaged communities, families will need access to support to build confidence and trust in formal systems.

Whilst the expansion is welcome, its current structure limits its potential impact on inclusive growth and poverty reduction. This is because the funded provision only operates during school day hours, is typically term time only and is limited to the year immediately before compulsory schooling. This model could go further to adequately support parents who work full-time hours, atypical hours (shift work, healthcare, retail, hospitality) and lone parents. Additionally, this risks reinforcing gender inequality in the labour market as mothers are more likely to have to reduce hours or exit the labour market and this effect is further exacerbated in the case of larger families. Evidence shows that part-time jobs are taken up to a larger degree by women and that the industry sectors where these jobs are found typically offer more unsociable hours, lower pay, less secure employment contracts and less flexibility to manage caring responsibilities alongside work. School holiday periods remain an area of concern for working parents in terms of providing adequate childcare and additionally, for families eligible for free schools meals, feeding their children.

Working parents on lower incomes should receive the same access to funded places and free school meals which can reduce inequalities in the system and ease financial pressure on household budgets. Financial viability is a major determinant for employment decisions and must be addressed to ensure choosing to be in work is a viable and sustainable choice.

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. Exemplary models from other countries include Sweden who offer an approach which better aligns with inclusive growth and gender equality: by typically developing a provision based on 6.30am to 6pm and sometimes at weekends, offering provision earlier (typically from 1 year onwards), offering it to all who want it using a funding model based on household earnings with a cap of 3% of income and support for larger families through a sliding scale of contribution for each subsequent child. Clearly, this type of model has implications regarding restructuring and an increase in financial commitments. However, it may be worth considering these factors in relation to future models.

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 could benefit from it the most, even within an expanded model and would undermine other actions within the strategy which are focused at children from socially disadvantaged backgrounds. Evidence consistently shows that early intervention has positive impacts for

children facing socio-economic disadvantage (currently Belfast has 26.9% of children living in relative poverty and 22.5% in absolute poverty, 2024). Child poverty is a major concern and impacts on educational attainment, health and wellbeing, emotional development and a range of other life outcomes. Socially deprived children are often further behind and require additional support. Therefore, the removal of this criteria seems counterintuitive to supporting our most vulnerable children and wider ambitions to tackle poverty.

The Department of Education's Fair Start Strategy & Action Plan identifies supporting children in their early years as a top priority. This is also reflected within the Belfast Agenda, the city's community plan. Research shows that supporting children in their early years, particularly those from disadvantaged backgrounds, improves educational achievement and employment opportunities, reduces behavioural difficulties, and lowers the likelihood of needing extra support services later in life. All of which boosts the economy, reduces the cost on the public purse and crucially improves the individuals quality of life.

It is surprising that this element of the recommendations has not been highlighted within the accompanying EQIA document – this should be given greater prominence in the document prior to any legislative changes, to identify potential adverse impacts against Section 75 groups. The issue of intersectionality must also be considered.

An overall concern about the targets outlined are that, apart from Category 1 actions (ending March 26), the rest are subject to available resources. Funding should be multi-year to provide assurance of commitment to families and the sector and enable the sector to offer secure, well-paid jobs and continued development and planning structure.

## Objective 1.2: Expand services for children facing disadvantage and children with additional needs.

### Actions already underway (April 2024 to March 2026)

- Provide at least 10% funding boost to enable the Sure Start programme to meet rising demand from over 36,200 eligible children and their families.
- Expand the Sure Start programme to bring within scope an additional 22 most disadvantaged Super Output Areas in Northern Ireland on a permanent basis, increasing access to an additional 2,500 children and their families.
- Further expand Sure Start by introducing a new outreach model, enabling access to around 1,800 additional children and families with evidenced need, regardless of geographical location.
- Fund at least 175 Pathway projects and increase the maximum level of awards from £30,000 to £40,000.
- Introduce a new Pathway funding stream to provide targeted support for over 650 childminders and AHCs.
- Provide enhanced funding to stabilise the Toybox project ensuring that service levels meet the needs of over 150 Traveller and Roma families.
- Undertake a scoping study to identify the needs of newcomer children (0–4 years) in Northern Ireland and how they may be supported within an expanded Toybox project.

### Actions that will be prioritised next subject to available resources (April 2026 to March 2030)

- Continue the category 1 expansions of targeted early learning programmes (Sure Start, Pathway and Toybox) until March 2030 to meet increasing service demands, with the provision of annual inflationary uplifts to consolidate the expanded provision.
- Commission a scoping study to report by March 2027 on options for further expansion of the Sure Start programme.
- Subject to the findings of the scoping study, expand the Sure Start programme to meet identified need.
- By March 2028, expand the Toybox project to include support for Newcomer children (0–4 years) and their families.
- In 2027 conduct a feasibility study of the potential to provide special school pre-school provision on a full-time (22.5 hours per week) basis.
- Continue the Category 1 expansions of targeted early learning programmes (Sure Start, Pathway and Toybox) until March 2030 to meet increasing service demands, with the provision of annual inflationary uplifts to consolidate the expanded provision.
- Commission a scoping study to report by March 2027 on options for further expansion of the Sure Start programme.
- Subject to the findings of the scoping study, expand the Sure Start programme to meet identified need.

- By March 2028, expand the Toybox project to include support for Newcomer children (0-4 years) and their families.
- In 2027, conduct a feasibility study of the potential to provide special school nursery provision on a full-time (22.5 hours per week) basis.

**Actions that may take longer to implement (April 2030 to March 2034)**

- Continue the expansions of targeted early learning programmes (Sure Start, Pathway and Toybox) in Categories 1 & 2 until March 2034 to meet increasing service demands, with the provision of annual inflationary uplifts to consolidate the expanded provision.
- Agree protocol for sharing of information on children’s developmental journeys at key transition points, to support forward planning and ensure better continuity of support.

**Question 2. To what extent do you agree or disagree with Objective 1.2 and its associated actions?**

*Please select only one item*

- Strongly Agree
- Agree
- Neither Agree nor Disagree
- Disagree
- Strongly Disagree

Do you have any other comments to make on Objective 1.2 and its associated actions?

The expansion of the aforementioned programmes (Sure Start, Pathway and Toybox) is strongly supported. Targeted interventions at this early stage are well known to be important in ensuring the best outcomes for children and their families and will enhance inclusion and accessibility particularly children facing disadvantage and additional needs.

Category 2 action proposals to carry out a feasibility study into the opportunity to provide full-time special pre-school nursery provision is very positive. However, more robust action to support pre-school children with special educational needs and disabilities is required.

Consideration should be given to a spending review to assess the growth of Sure Start, the demand for its services and its expansion into new Super Output Areas to ensure that a 10% funding boost is sufficient to meet levels of demand.

Improving social mobility is a key inclusive growth objective for Belfast and focusing on those children and families who face greater disadvantage and barriers from an early stage aligns with this objective by working to provide integrated support to reduce the achievement gap. In particular, the elements of including outreach models should enable more targeted support and help to those who may have otherwise not engaged. In addition, support for newcomer, Traveller and Roma families is welcome as again these families have been found to face additional barriers to accessing services and support across society. Trusted support organisations and those with lived experience with knowledge of the specific developmental needs of these groups should be at the heart of the scoping study.

Inclusive growth requires sustained and co-ordinated investment in families and communities where disadvantage is concentrated and the inclusion of child poverty indicators could be considered as part of the assessment of where additional Sure Start provision should be concentrated. In addition, uptake and outcomes should be monitored by different Section 75 groups by all partners involved in design and delivery.

### Objective 1.3: Extend developmental provision for children aged 2-3 (in their pre-school year)

<b>Actions already underway (April 2024 to March 2026)</b>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Provide 1,790 2–3-year-olds with access to the Sure Start Developmental Programme in current and expanded geographical areas and through a new Outreach model.</li></ul>
<b>Actions that will be prioritised next subject to available resources (April 2026 to March 2030)</b>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Progressively extend access to developmental support for children aged 2–3, initially prioritising children facing disadvantage and those with additional needs.</li><li>• Develop a holistic approach to child development through integrated family-centered services which brings together Allied Health Professionals, Speech and Language Therapists, early years practitioners, family support teams, and others to develop a targeted programme for children with emerging additional needs, including support for parents and families.</li></ul>
<b>Actions that may take longer to implement (April 2030 to March 2034)</b>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Provide access to appropriate developmental provision for all children aged 2–3 (in their pre-pre-school year).</li></ul>

### Question 3. To what extent do you agree or disagree with Objective 1.3 and its associated actions?

*Please select only one item*

- Strongly Agree
- Agree
- Neither Agree nor Disagree
- Disagree
- Strongly Disagree

Do you have any other comments to make on Objective 1.3 and its associated actions?

Extending developmental provision at 2-3 years is very welcome as evidence reinforces the positive impact of intervention at this age in relation to speech, language, emotional regulation, trauma impacts and socio-economic development and inclusion. Prioritising children facing disadvantage and those with additional needs is welcome for the reasons outlined earlier. Also, the proposed integrated model of support for children and families reflects best practice in maximising resources and positive outcomes.

An area to consider, where appropriate, would be the involvement of parents in the co-design of aspects of these support models. Meaningful community engagement drawing on lived experience alongside professional input can ensure that the children and families who would benefit the most will have the confidence to access and sustain involvement with these services.

#### **Objective 1.4: Promote high-quality provision across all early learning and childcare providers.**

##### **Actions already underway (April 2024 to March 2026)**

- Increase the financial support for the development of the Irish Medium (IM) Pre-school Support Service.
- Promote the value and benefits of play, providing professional training and development services to support best practice and promote inclusivity.
- Promote speech, language and communication development for children in the early years and develop a series of universally accessible bite size videos.
- Support staff within the Pre-school Education Programme (PSEP) settings to engage more effectively with parents to create, sustain and improve positive and nurturing home learning environments.
- Provide the BookTrust Bookstart Baby programme to all babies in their first year.

##### **Actions that will be prioritised next subject to available resources (April 2026 to March 2030)**

- By March 2028, in consultation with early years experts, design and introduce an integrated Early Years Framework for children aged 0-6 that provides a single continuum for children below compulsory school age as they transition to formal education. The unified framework will be used in all ELC providers and will align with the Foundation Stage of the reformed statutory curriculum. The framework will set out broad expectations for children's development across key domains.

- Promote stronger parent-practitioner partnerships across all education and ELC providers, building on existing Getting Ready to Learn Programme and other relevant initiatives including support for children who are pre-term.
- Strengthen Irish Medium (IM) early years immersion and pedagogy through the roll-out of an IM Pre-School Immersion Education Course, including supporting stronger parent-practitioner partnerships.
- Provide high-quality support services and professional advice to both non-statutory and statutory Pre-school Education Programme (PSEP) providers to develop good practice and support them to meet the needs of all children.

**Actions that may take longer to implement (April 2030 to March 2034)**

- Introduce a regional approach to ensuring timely and equitable access to speech and language support services in the early years.
- Develop a Play Programme and guidance for inclusive early learning and childcare environments, both physical and learning, informed by professionals across Education and Health.

**Question 4. To what extent do you agree or disagree with Objective 1.4 and its associated actions?**

*Please select only one item*

- Strongly Agree
- Agree
- Neither Agree nor Disagree
- Disagree
- Strongly Disagree

Do you have any comments to make on Objective 1.4 and its associated actions?

We welcome and support actions to promote high-quality provision and to strengthen play and inclusion in early learning. We agree with the general direction and recognise that some improvements can happen quickly, while others will take more time and planning. However, some parts of the proposals lack detail to fully understand how they will work in practice. Without clearer plans, there is a risk that they may not lead to consistent or meaningful change.

We welcome the work already underway to:

- Promote the importance of play in children's learning and well-being.
- Provide training and professional development to support inclusive practice.

These are positive steps. Ongoing training is essential so that staff feel confident and supported in meeting the needs of all children. It will also be helpful to review this training regularly to ensure it remains useful, inclusive, and up to date. While these actions are positive, it is unclear how widely this training will reach staff or how its impact will be measured. More information is needed on how quality improvement and consistency will be ensured.

Regarding actions that may take longer to implement:

We agree that developing a Play Programme and guidance for inclusive early learning environments will take time, and we support a phased approach to this work. Involving staff and professionals from different sectors will help ensure the programme is practical, realistic, and effective. While this is welcome, the consultation fails to outline how this joint working will be coordinated or resourced. It is also unclear what the Play Programme will include and how it will differ from existing guidance. Overall, we support the proposals and the progress already being made. To strengthen the final approach, we suggest:

- Being clear about what the Play Programme will include.
- Ensuring strong collaboration between education, health and other professionals.
- Setting out clear timescales and practical guidance for implementation.

Consideration should be given to capital funding to enable the physical expansion to Irish Medium and Pre-School infrastructure to meet the growing needs of the sector and to enhance the number of places available in a pre-school setting. There is a lack of Irish Medium Childcare and pre-school settings which is having a negative impact on children and families who use Irish as their first language.

GaelChúrsaí have developed an Irish Medium pre-school education module as part of their delivery. Consideration should be given to using Belfast City Council's Irish Medium Employment Academy or the contractor directly to meet the relevant objectives.

The Irish Medium education sector is rapidly growing and there aren't enough trained and qualified people entering the sector to meet demand. To ensure quality there needs to be a scaling of the number of people who are entering the sector who are trained at the appropriate level and trained in immersive education in an Irish Medium learning environment. The Irish Medium Employment Academies are ideally placed to address this need.

Overall, the actions listed are welcome, in particular their focus on providing an integrated early years framework and support and guidance to those working in statutory and non-statutory provision. This should enable the provision of high quality care and services across the sector and help achieve better outcomes for children and their families.

Working to develop the relationship between parents and providers across the sector to better enable parents to translate this into the home environment is also positive. This will require the involvement of trusted support organisations to ensure that parents have the confidence and sector knowledge to have their voices heard. Consideration should be given to strengthening links with newcomer communities to ensure a level playing field for pre-school children and their families by reducing or removing barriers due to language and culture.

## THEME 2: Supporting families with their children's learning and childcare costs



### Outcomes:

- Families can access more affordable childcare that meets their needs
- Families are better equipped to understand and support their child's learning

### Objective 2.1: Make childcare more affordable.

<b>Actions already underway (April 2024 to March 2026)</b>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Introduce a bespoke Northern Ireland Childcare Subsidy Scheme (NICSS) providing a 15% subsidy on childcare costs for eligible working families. When combined with Tax Free Childcare (TFC) this will reduce bills by up to 32%.</li></ul>
<b>Actions that will be prioritised next subject to available resources (April 2026 to March 2030)</b>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Increase the NICSS contribution to 20% for all eligible children from April 2026. Combined with TFC this will reduce bills by up to 36%.</li><li>• Subject to satisfactory real time evaluation of the NICSS expansion and analysis of fees, incrementally increase the subsidy up to 30% by April 2030. Combined with TFC this will provide a deduction on childcare bills up to 44%.</li><li>• Introduce fee publication requirements for those providers operating the NICSS, to produce greater transparency on the costs of childcare across all providers and enable increases to be monitored and reported.</li><li>• Annually increase the cap on the maximum subsidy which can be claimed through the NICSS in line with the associated subsidy percentage and inflation.</li><li>• Raise awareness of the full range of financial support available with the costs of childcare, including through NICSS, TFC, Universal Credit (UC) and targeted initiatives for those undergoing education/training.</li></ul>
<b>Actions that may take longer to implement (April 2030 to March 2034)</b>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Subject to satisfactory real time evaluation of the NICSS expansion and analysis of fees, increase the subsidy up to 40% by April 2032. Combined with TFC, this will provide a total deduction on childcare bills of up to 52%.</li></ul>

- Extend Digital Economy Act (DEA) powers to Northern Ireland and DE to enable sharing of information from TFC to streamline verification requirements for NICSS users.

## Question 5. To what extent do you agree or disagree with Objective 2.1 and its associated actions?

Please select only one item

- Strongly Agree
- Agree
- Neither Agree nor Disagree
- Disagree
- Strongly Disagree

Do you have any other comments to make on Objective 2.1 and its associated actions?

The actions listed to make childcare more affordable are to be welcomed and while they can remove key barriers to employment they could be enhanced further. Proposals will be a great support to individuals who are seeking to re-enter the labour market but are unable to due to childcare availability and costs. They should also enable working parents, who meet the criteria, to reduce their childcare bills. Reducing childcare costs is fundamental to inclusive economic growth, particularly for women's labour market participation. As women are primary caregivers this limits their availability to work, accounting for 40% of the gender pay gap and driving in-work poverty in households, especially among lone parent families, 84% of whom are women (Government Equalities Office, 2019).

According to the 2011 Census, in just over half (50.7%) of lone parent households in NI, the parent is not in employment, in 32%, the parent works part-time; and in 16.3%, the parent works full time. Lone parent households are considered at greater risk of economic disadvantage, and affordable childcare is an important consideration to support women and lone parents' participation in employment (BCC Audit of Inequalities, 2021).

While the proposed policy identifies average daily childcare fees and trends over time, it doesn't explore regional cost variations and demand levels. Regional variations in the cost of childcare means that families in the Belfast City Council area (along with Derry City and Strabane) can face average monthly costs of £288, compared to £136 in Causeway Coast and Glens area. The Belfast average monthly childcare cost is 28% higher than the NI median of £225 (<https://explore.nisra.gov.uk/childcare-survey/>).

In addition, research shows that within the UK, concerns persist around the affordability, access and quality of provision, particularly in low income areas. Whilst an action around ensuring the transparency of fees is provided, further work may be necessary to map out the current provision and identify any areas of concern in terms of not only fees but also availability and also to ensure that the benefits provided by the planned increased subsidies are not minimised by any inflationary uplifts/ increased fees by providers.

## Objective 2.2: Improve the information available on childcare.

<b>Actions already underway</b> (April 2024 to March 2026)
<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Encourage uptake of financial support with the costs of childcare, through a promotional campaign to raise awareness of all government support available.</li><li>• Conduct and publish Northern Ireland Childcare Survey Official Statistics.</li></ul>
<b>Actions that will be prioritised next subject to available resources</b> (April 2026 to March 2030)
<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Provide enhanced information to inform parental decisions in pre-school admissions.</li><li>• Establish regular and ongoing sector wide data collection and monitoring to:<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• map supply and demand of childcare provision across all geographical areas; and</li><li>• identify sustainability challenges in specific areas.</li></ul></li><li>• Design and implement a regular data collection programme to monitor trends in childcare requirements and labour market decisions.</li></ul>
<b>Actions that may take longer to implement</b> (April 2030 to March 2034)
<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Develop a user-friendly digital platform to improve access to information for parents and providers, taking account of existing FSNI platform and the need to integrate with Make the Call and NI Direct.</li><li>• Establish a parental support programme for parents of children age 0–4 with SEN/D.</li><li>• Provide enhanced information to parents on the capacity of registered childcare providers to provide inclusive and accessible provision for children with SEN/D.</li></ul>

### Question 6. To what extent do you agree or disagree with Objective 2.2 and its associated actions?

*Please select only one item*

- Strongly Agree
- Agree
- Neither Agree nor Disagree
- Disagree
- Strongly Disagree

Do you have any other comments to make on Objective 2.2 and its associated actions?

The focus on enhancing information provision to families and encouraging families to avail of the support that is available is to be welcomed and would enhance inclusion and accessibility. Consideration should be given to prioritising these activities and the inclusion of outreach activities to raise awareness beyond a promotional campaign. Lack of information is a major barrier in accessing services and the needs of those who may face additional barriers should be factored in when designing any new provision. For example, those with lower literacy levels or where English is not their first language. In addition, thought could be given to making sure that information is provided through trusted community based services where families may already go to access support and help.

A digital platform is welcome but may exclude those who face digital poverty and should be complemented by face to face advice to ensure accessibility to different groups ie. those with a disability, those with additional language requirements.

Consideration should also be given to ensuring that the data collected in relation to childcare provision and childcare requirements should be disaggregated by communities of interest and place.

## THEME 3: Supporting the early years sector and workforce



### 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

### Objective 3.1: Build the sustainability and capacity of the Early Learning and Childcare sector.

#### Actions already underway (April 2024 to March 2026)

- Increase the non-statutory Pre-school Education Programme (PSEP) funding rate to bring it into line with the statutory sector.
- Provide funding support to over 650 childminders/ AHCs to support training and resource needs through the Pathway Fund.
- Train 150 new childminders through Labour Market Partnerships.
- Uplift the level of core funding providing early years sector support.
- Publication of the DfE research study on Childcare Providers Targeted Business Support.

#### Actions that will be prioritised next subject to available resources (April 2026 to March 2030)

- Establish a Childcare Business Advisory service: DfE will lead the development and delivery of a childcare business advisory service to:
  - Create a service that suits the needs of individual providers
  - Give all childcare providers access to a professional advisor who is equipped to identify those issues inhibiting the provider
  - Record common issues and opportunities within the Sector so that a holistic picture of the wider issues facing the Sector can be best understood, thereby enabling support to be tailored over time
- Develop a Strategic Childcare Accessibility Fund, informed by mapping of supply and demand initially focused on:
  - Areas of disadvantage
  - Provision for children with additional needs
  - Rural provision
  - Social Enterprise provision
  - Families working atypical hours
  - wraparound care within the schools estate

- Establish a PSEP Strategic Support Fund to address short-term pressures in strategically important non-statutory pre-school education settings.
- Amend the current moratorium on Development Proposals (DPs) to facilitate requests for new or additional statutory pre-school provision to be established on a full-time basis.
- Provide annual inflationary uplifts to core Early Years funding.

**Actions that may take longer to implement (April 2030 to March 2034)**

- Ensure access to inclusive, high-quality early learning and childcare environments through increased capital funding, including for children with SEN.
- Continue annual inflationary uplifts to Core Early Years funding.

### Question 7. To what extent do you agree or disagree with Objective 3.1 and its associated actions?

*Please select only one item*

- Strongly Agree
- Agree
- Neither Agree nor Disagree
- Disagree
- Strongly Disagree

Do you have any other comments to make on Objective 3.1 and its associated actions?

The actions to build the sustainability and capacity of the Early Learning and Childcare sector are strongly supported and will be critical to achieving the wider ambitions of the strategy. Ensuring the sustainability of the sector is key in providing workforce stability and in turn ensuring better outcomes for families and children. In addition, training more childcare providers offers an opportunity for employment and upskilling within the sector and an opportunity to further inclusive growth.

Over the last eight years Belfast City Council have successfully delivered a number of employment academies in relation to childcare and upskilling in this sector e.g. Child Care and Play Work Level 3 and Level 5 and would welcome further conversations around this specific initiative. Council's economic development team may be able to positively contribute to the supply of trained individuals through their employment academies.

There are however, systemic issues with the employment terms and conditions within the sector. The combination of a low salary, long working hours and challenging job role make the sector less desirable. If the goal is a trained, high performing workforce staff will need to be paid a professional wage. Currently, new entrants receive the minimum wage which makes this an unappealing sector for many.

There is also an issue with recruitment, a recent workforce survey undertaken by the early years care education and play employers forum noted that regionally 24 percent of respondents (employers) stated they required full time staff. 3 percent also reported requiring part time staff and 20 percent a combination of both. 11 percent require managerial staff. 62.5 percent of those successful at interview are accepting jobs that are offered. These results evidence a major deficit with recruitment with respondents highlighting that they were 'worried about the future due to having to decrease provision

and the potential risk of closure'. Retention of staff is also a major challenge for the sector and jeopardises future sustainable provision. BCC academies are trying to address this issue but it remains challenging to attract staff to the sector. Offering free training and a full career pathway from entry level to level 5 staff is required.

The development of an accessibility fund focused on the areas identified is welcome and may offer the opportunity to offset some concerns outlined in 1.1 of this consultation response in relation to provision in areas of deprivation, support for those working outside core business hours and the gap in provision in relation to term time.

There is an urgent need for Special Educational Needs tailored provision which should be prioritised due to the increasing number of children who are presenting with these issues and require early and sustained support. BCC have delivered Level 3 OCN SEN- Behaviours known to challenge. As the number of children with statements increase, skills and knowledge need to increase with it.

While the proposals are welcome, how do we ensure every child with an additional need will benefit from these services. For example, there is no reference to deaf children or sign language development. Evidence suggests that a deaf child will benefit from sign language learning from an early age. (Deaf children's early sign language access: a guiding values brief, The Journal of Deaf Studies and Deaf Education, Oxford Academic).

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.

## Objective 3.2: Enhance accessible Early Learning and Childcare for children with additional needs.

<b>Actions already underway (April 2024 to March 2026)</b>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Extend the reach of the Department of Health (DoH) Fair Play Grant Scheme to approximately 80 settings, supporting nearly 400 children.</li><li>• Launch a pilot scheme for recruitment of Approved Home Childcarers (AHCs).</li><li>• Establish Pre-school Inclusion Fund to support pre-school children with Special Educational Needs/Disability (SEN/D).</li><li>• Fund 72 special schools and early years specialist provisions to purchase resources, training or equipment for the benefit of children in pre-school, Primary 1 and Primary 2 in their settings.</li></ul>
<b>Actions that will be prioritised next subject to available resources (April 2026 to March 2030)</b>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Further roll-out of the Pre-School Inclusion Fund to support children who have/may have SEN/D.</li><li>• Combine and enhance the DoH Fair Play Grant Scheme and Bright Start Holiday Grant Scheme for Children with a Disability (to ensure a continuum of support across term time and non-term time for all registered childcare providers, including childminders).</li><li>• Test and trial school-based childcare/after-school provision for children in special schools and specialist provision.</li><li>• Build on the AHC pilot to increase the number and training provided to AHCs, including facilitating a matching service between families and AHCs.</li></ul>
<b>Actions that may take longer to implement (April 2030 to March 2034)</b>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• In conjunction with the review of DoH Minimum Standards, consider the upper age limit which young people with SEN/D can access registered childcare provision.</li></ul>

### Question 8. To what extent do you agree or disagree with Objective 3.2 and its associated actions?

*Please select only one item*

- Strongly Agree
- Agree
- Neither Agree nor Disagree
- Disagree
- Strongly Disagree

Do you have any other comments to make on Objective 3.2 and its associated actions?

Actions to enhance accessible early learning and childcare for children with additional needs are essential and strongly supported. This is an area that has been lacking for a considerable time, despite growing demand and is central to ensuring inclusion and equality. In particular, providing childcare provision throughout the year and the extension of the Approved Home Childcarers pilot are welcome as they offer a greater degree of choice and flexibility to parents.

Key findings of the report 'Understanding the Childcare Needs of Families with Children who have Disabilities or Additional Needs' (Webb, 2025) found:

- the majority of parents surveyed (90.4 percent) indicated it is not easy for families with children who have disabilities or additional needs to find childcare.
- staff expertise was important to them, with 72 percent of parents ranking staff skills and knowledge as their top priority when considering childcare.
- overall, parents' top three childcare priorities were staff skills and knowledge, cost, and flexibility.
- however, they disagreed that staff have the required specialist knowledge and understanding (66.7 per cent); that childcare was affordable (71.9 percent) and that they can access childcare with flexible hours (71 percent).
- there was a lack of awareness about Approved Home Childcare, however most parents indicated 'yes' (38.1 percent) or 'maybe' (48.2 percent) they would be interested in using it.
- several benefits of the model were identified including flexibility and convenience.

Approved Home Childcare is provision where a registered and trained childcare worker goes to the home of the child. The above study (Webb, 2025) showed that a high percentage of parents interviewed were unaware this was an option. Only 12 percent would not avail of it. This is a preferable option to parents of children with disabilities and SEN because often the barrier is removing the child from the home environment to the childcare placement. Also, this is a very useful option for shift workers whose working hours fall outside mainstream provision.

When considering AHC, parents identified a number of key benefits. Many thought it would suit families who were struggling to find mainstream settings that could meet their children's needs. It could be particularly helpful for children with complex sensory needs, challenging behaviour and anxiety who may feel safer and more relaxed in their home environment. Children's equipment is also at home, for example sensory toys, which is advantageous as they may not be provided by childminders due to expense. Other benefits included parents being able to go straight home from work or other appointments, without having to travel to and from childcare providers.

While the proposals are welcome, as previously noted, how do we ensure every child with an additional need will benefit from these services. For example, there is no reference to deaf children or sign language development. Evidence suggests that a deaf child will benefit from sign language learning from an early age (Deaf children's early sign language access: a guiding values brief, The Journal of Deaf Studies and Deaf Education, Oxford Academic).

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. This ELC Strategy would benefit by including this as an additional action. The Bill is expected to become law later this year.

### **Objective 3.3: Enhance the early years infrastructure through a skilled and valued workforce.**

**Actions already underway** (April 2024 to March 2026)

- Provide funding to the Department of Health (DoH) for an additional 900 funded training places, including continued professional development.
- Provide funding to Department for the Economy (DfE) for:
  - development programme for the provision of on-line accredited micro courses by the Further Education Colleges to provide flexible learning opportunities for the childcare sector; and
  - a qualification mapping exercise to identify gaps in terms of management qualifications.

**Actions that will be prioritised next subject to available resources (April 2026 to March 2030)**

- Develop a comprehensive ELC Workforce Plan to support the development of the current workforce and incentivise early learning and childcare as a valued career choice.
- Establish a comprehensive ELC qualification and career framework with pathways for continuing professional development (CPD), including a review of existing qualifications, an accredited ELC programme and enhanced support for staff to move to leadership roles.
- Develop a specific SEN/D CPD framework for education settings and childcare providers.
- Monitor the workforce needs of the ELC sector to ensure opportunities are provided for upskilling and reskilling, removing barriers to training opportunities, including support for sub cover.
- Promote the establishment of a sectoral representative body to support the professionalisation of the childcare sector.
- Require all ELC providers funded by Government, to pay their staff at least the Real Living Wage.
- In conjunction with the 'Good Jobs' priority in DfE's Economic Vision, promote the Real Living Wage with ELC employing organisations.

**Actions that may take longer to implement (April 2030 to March 2034)**

- Strengthen regulation and inspection through collaboration between The Education and Training Inspectorate (ETI) and Health and Social Care Trusts (HSCs).
- In conjunction with DoH, ensure information gathered through Registration and Inspection within HSC Trusts is accessible through appropriate Data Sharing agreements to support longer term policy developments and operational implementation.
- Consult on proposals for placing ELC provision on a legislative basis.
- Review the staff: child ratio in statutory pre-school provision, considering the impact of other related actions to be introduced by this strategy and SEN/D reform.

## Question 9. To what extent do you agree or disagree with Objective 3.3 and its associated actions?

*Please select only one item*

- Strongly Agree

- Agree
- Neither Agree nor Disagree
- Disagree
- Strongly Disagree

Do you have any other comments to make on Objective 3.3 and its associated actions?

Additional comments

The actions listed to ensure the workforce are skilled and valued are strongly supported. 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, encouraging other employers to commit to offering good work and adopting inclusive business practices that support inclusive growth ambitions. We would be keen to identify areas for collaboration.

Belfast currently has 23% of residents paid below the Real Living Wage. However, 40.5% of those in part-time work, of which we know the majority are women, are paid below the RLW. Given that this sector is a large employer for women this commitment is welcome in seeking to narrow the gender pay gap. Also, the opportunity for flexible learning and progression is key to continued skills development, particularly for those with caring responsibilities.

Establishing a ELC qualification and career framework with pathways for continual professional development may support the professionalisation of the sector and staff retention. It is important that any employment and/or training opportunities are considered within ambitions to achieve an inclusive and sustainable economy. Targeted employment pathways and support to minimise barriers should be considered for those who are furthest removed from the labour market.

Better pay conditions and supporting staff within the sector to engage in the CPD process (by affording time off to complete studies) would help to reform the sector, incentivise more people to consider childcare as a viable career path and support staff retention. Quality training is also important, especially to meet the needs of children with disabilities and SEN. The report cited above (Webb, 2025) highlighted that parents would like access to more childminders with the skills and availability to care for children with disabilities or additional needs.

Again, as highlighted earlier, data should be disaggregated by equality considerations both by people and place.

**Question 10 If you have any additional comments relating to the draft strategy, please enter them in the box below:**

**Belfast City Council has been proactively encouraging new entrants to move into the childcare sector for the past 8 years by delivering entry level academies to people wishing to work in the sector. Thereafter, offering a Level 3 and a Level 5 upskilling qualification to promote career progression and retention – further details are provided below.**

**BCC in 2021 developed Classroom Assistant programmes, which support pre-school children and Childminding and Approved Home Childminders Employment Academies in 2024.**

**The Classroom Assistant programmes (for pre-school, primary and secondary/grammar education) include:**

**Entry level, five-day Classroom Assistant Employment Academies (2021) in response to the Covid-19 crisis whereby children were unable to attend school due to the lack of classroom assistant support. This issue was having a detrimental impact on the most vulnerable children with the most complex of needs. Children in Special Education Schools were unable to attend school unless they had the support of a classroom assistant. This staff shortage was not only impacting the disabled children’s education but also their speech and language therapy, physical therapy, occupational therapy and much more. These services were delivered on-site during school hours and as children were unable to attend they were further disadvantaged by the staffing crisis. BCC responded to this crisis by developing a basic model that consisted of a five-day, entry-level employment academy for people interested in working as a Classroom Assistant. This pilot supported 15 participants and focused on an introduction to working with children and the education environment. The academy was successful with all 15 participants moving into paid employment within the education sector.**

**Building on this, BCC developed a Level 3 upskilling provision for Classroom Assistants, with the explicit aim of supporting residents into better jobs with improved terms and conditions, enhanced skills, and access to permanent roles.**

**Once established, BCC partnered with Gaelchursaí to deliver both the entry-level and Level 3 provision through Irish Medium, ensuring accessibility for families with Irish as a first language.**

**Working in collaboration with the Educational Inequalities Group and Stranmillis University, BCC developed a Level 4 qualification to upskill the**

**permanent classroom assistants. This created a clear progression route for experienced staff and helped strengthen staff retention.**

**To address the unmet need of children who are Deaf or have a hearing-loss and through engagement with Jordanstown School (the Northern Ireland school for Deaf and Blind pupils), we identified a significant gap in provision. Classroom assistants who were Deaf or had hearing loss were unable to complete the standard Level 3 qualification, as assessment via British Sign Language/Irish Sign Language was not supported due to cost and quality-assurance concerns. In response, BCC designed a bespoke Classroom Assistant Employment and Upskilling Academy for Deaf people and people with hearing loss, delivered through BSL and ISL. Key features include: A five-day employment academy; Completion of the Level 3 Certificate in Supporting Teaching and Learning in Schools (QCF 5329-31) over approximately 12 months; and One-to-one mentoring throughout. Eligibility criteria includes: Fluent in BSL or ISL; Resident in Belfast; and Unemployed or underemployed.**

**This programme is due to end in June 2026, with 10 participants expected to complete. This is the first programme of its kind in Northern Ireland. BCC also aim to train up to two participants to become Deaf assessors, enabling sustainability and future progression pathways. The cost is approximately £4,000 per participant, a significant investment, but one that has delivered high impact for both participants and pupils, while helping address critical workforce shortages within the Deaf community.**

**BCC developed a Level 3 OCN qualification in Special Educational Needs for those reluctant to commit initially to the full Level 3 qualification. This six-week course significantly improved confidence and progression, with most participants subsequently moving on to the Level 3 CACHE qualification.**

**BCC also introduced a sector-specific ESOL bolt-on for newcomers, supporting development of education-specific language. This has markedly improved interview outcomes and successful entry into employment.**

**In 2025, BCC responded to new EA standards. With the Education Authority's requirement that all classroom assistants hold a minimum Level 3 qualification by June 2026, our original five-day academies are no longer sufficient as standalone provision. A Classroom Assistant Employment and Upskilling Academy has been designed to professionalise both new entrants and the existing workforce.**

**This enhanced academy includes: Two weeks of online training (via Zoom); Accredited Level 2 Safeguarding; OCN Level 3 SEN qualification; QCF Level 3**

**Teaching and Supporting Learning; Training in child development, learning styles, play in education, and classroom management; One-to-one mentoring; Employability support (CVs, interviews, job search); Sector insight; and a minimum of 300 hours of classroom practice.**

**While this model is resource-intensive, BCC believes it offers a sustainable solution that supports a more secure and skilled workforce for schools; creates pathways to better jobs for residents; and improves outcomes and quality of support for children, particularly those with additional needs.**

**The Self-Employment Childminding Academy is a training initiative that aims to provide support and mentoring for people who would like to become a Childminder or an Approved Home Child Carer.**

**The academy will include: an awareness workshop to develop understanding of the Childminding and Approved Home Childcare sector; free mandatory and certified training (Paediatric First Aid, Safeguarding and Health and Safety); one year membership with Northern Ireland Childminding Association (NICMA); support with the childminding registration process; and one-to-one mentoring and business support.**

**Eligibility Criteria includes: over 18; live in Belfast; be able to communicate in English; be unemployed or working fewer than 16 hours per week; and have the right to work in the UK.**

**BCC also offers additional support for people whose first language is: Arabic; Bengali; Ukrainian; Irish; and people who are Deaf or have hearing loss. This additional support includes the provision of all policies and procedures in the participant's native language and the use of an interpreter during the training to make sure that participants fully understand all aspects of the course.**

# Impact Assessments

## Question 11. Do you agree or disagree with the draft Equality Impact Assessment (EQIA)?

*Please select only one item*

- Agree
- Disagree

Please add any additional comments in the box below

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- this is concerning and should be reconsidered.

Monitoring and evaluation frameworks should incorporate the means to disaggregate data (both quantitative and qualitative) by Section 75 considerations during implementation.

## Question 12. Do you agree or disagree with the draft Rural Needs Impact Assessment?

*Please select only one item*

- Agree
- Disagree

Please add any additional comments in the box below

The assessment does recognise geographical access to provision and considers the additional barriers rural families face in accessing early learning and childcare services, including transport, limited provider choice and support options.

**Question 13. Do you agree or disagree with the draft Child Rights Impact Assessment?**

*Please select only one item*

- Agree
- Disagree

Please add any additional comments in the box below

While the Child Rights Impact Assessment recognises the importance of early development and access to services it could more fully consider how these rights are impacted and linked to their families' ability to access and engage with support and the barriers they may face due to poverty, additional needs or trauma.

**Question 14. Are you responding to this consultation as an individual or on behalf of an organisation?** *(Required)*

*Please select only one item*

- Individual  (Go to question 15)
- Organisation  (Go to question 16)

## Respondent details

**Question 15. If you are responding as an individual?**

Name *(Required)*

Click or tap here to enter text.

Email *(Required)*

Click or tap here to enter text.

Are you?

*Please select all that apply*

- A Parent or Guardian
- A Grandparent
- An Early Learning Childcare Practitioner
- Other (please specify):

Click or tap here to enter text.

**Question 16. If you are responding as an individual?**

**Contact Details**

Click or tap here to enter text.

**Organisation name**

Belfast City Council

**Your name**

John Tully

**Your position**

Director City and Organisational Strategy

**Email address**

communityplanning@belfastcity.gov.uk

**Phone number**

028 9032 0202

**Question 17. Which of the following best describes your organisation's sector?** *This will assist us in monitoring the range of users the consultation has reached.*

*Please select only one item*

- Central government
- Local government
- Statutory body (e.g., health, education, transport, housing, etc.)
- Private/Independent sector
- Social/ Academic research
- Charity/ Community/ Voluntary
- Press/ media
- Other

Other please state

Click or tap here to enter text.

**Question 18. If your organisation is a childcare provider, which of the following best describes your provider type?**

*Please select only one item*

- SureStart
- Childminder
- Day Nursery
- Parent & Toddler
- Statutory Nursery School/Unit
- Approved Home Childcare
- Crèche
- Out of School
- Pre-School Playgroup
- Summer Scheme
- Primary School
- Other

Other please state

Click or tap here to enter text.

**Question 19. We may need to clarify some aspects of your response. May we contact you to discuss your response to this consultation?**

*(Required)*

*Please select only one item*

- Yes
- No

**Question 20. Consent**

To support transparency in our decision-making process, all responses to this consultation will be made public (subject to our [Moderation Policy](#) ). This will include the name of the responding organisation (if applicable). However, names of individuals will only be published if you give consent below. Please note that we will not publish your contact details. *(Required)*

*Please select only one item*

- Yes, I consent to my name being published with my response
- No, please remove my name before publishing my response

All responses will be treated in line with the [Department of Education NI Privacy Notice](#). Please be aware that any information provided in response to this consultation could be made publicly available if requested under a Freedom of Information request.