



Consortium for the Regional Support for Women in Disadvantaged and Rural Areas

Response to: Draft Early Learning and Childcare Strategy

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Foyle Women's
Information
Network

Women's Regional Consortium: Working to Support Women in Rural Communities and Disadvantaged Urban Areas

1. Introduction

1.1 This response has been undertaken collaboratively by the members of the Consortium for the Regional Support for Women in Disadvantaged and Rural Areas (hereafter, either the Women's Regional Consortium or simply the Consortium), which is funded by the Department for Communities and the Department of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs.

1.2 The Women's Regional Consortium consists of seven established women's sector organisations that are committed to working in partnership with each other, government, statutory organisations and women's organisations, centres and groups in disadvantaged and rural areas, to ensure that organisations working for women are given the best possible support in the work they do in tackling disadvantage and social exclusion.¹ The seven groups are as follows:

- ♀ Training for Women Network (TWN) – Project lead
- ♀ Women's Resource and Development Agency (WRDA)
- ♀ Women's Support Network (WSN)
- ♀ Northern Ireland's Rural Women's Network (NIRWN)
- ♀ Women's TEC
- ♀ Women's Centre Derry
- ♀ Foyle Women's Information Network (FWIN)

1.3 The Consortium is the established link and strategic partner between government and statutory agencies and women in disadvantaged and rural areas, including all groups, centres and organisations delivering essential frontline services, advice and

¹ Sections 1.2-1.3 represent the official description of the Consortium's work, as agreed and authored by its seven partner organisation

support. The Consortium ensures that there is a continuous two-way flow of information between government and the sector. It also ensures that organisations/centres and groups are made aware of consultations, government planning and policy implementation. In turn, the Consortium ascertains the views, needs and aspirations of women in disadvantaged and rural areas and takes these views forward to influence policy development and future government planning, which ultimately results in the empowerment of local women in disadvantaged and rurally isolated communities.

1.4 The Women's Regional Consortium appreciates the opportunity to respond to the Northern Ireland Executive's draft Early Learning and Childcare Strategy. We have waited a long time for this Strategy and alongside colleagues in the women's sector and beyond have continued to highlight that accessible, affordable childcare is a vital part of our infrastructure and must be invested in as such. Childcare is vitally important to women who, because of gendered norms, are responsible for the majority of childcare. Getting the Early Learning and Childcare Strategy right is therefore key to helping to address gender inequality.

1.5 The Women's Regional Consortium want to see delivery of a fit for purpose, accessible, affordable childcare system across the whole of Northern Ireland including appropriate childcare for children with special needs. This must include early learning and childcare for those on the lowest incomes to enable them to access the education, training and skills they need to help them make the move into work and to remain in work.

1.5 We wish to endorse the response made by the Women's Policy Group (WPG)/Childcare for All Coalition of which the Women's Regional Consortium is a member and the response by Melted Parents.

2.0 General Comments

2.1 Format of the Consultation

We have concerns about the format of the consultation questions. The consultation asks a series of questions with a range of agree/disagree options followed by a space to provide any other comments. As WRDA guidance on public consultations² states: “*the binary ‘agree/disagree’ nature of many questions hides the complexity of how people feel about different issues.*” The answers to these ‘agree/disagree’ questions needs careful analysis alongside the accompanying text. Careful consideration must be given to the fact that respondents may select one of these options but provide further clarification in the text. They may have several qualifications to their answer and if these are not addressed their answer may be different. The results from the ‘agree/disagree’ questions **must not** be considered in isolation or presented in such a way that they paint a misleading picture of responses. **The Women’s Regional Consortium will therefore not engage with the agree/disagree options outlined in the consultation.**

2.2 Value of Community and Voluntary Sector Input to the Strategy

The Women’s Regional Consortium is disappointed that the draft Early Learning and Childcare Strategy does not acknowledge the important research work and lived experience evidence provided by the Community and Voluntary Sector in relation to childcare. Research, evidence and recommendations by the sector are a vital part of this process and should be valued and considered in the final Strategy. This includes the Feminist Recovery Plan for Northern Ireland³, the Gender Equality Strategy Expert Panel Report⁴, information and a briefing from an event held by the Childcare for All Coalition⁵ in September 2025, research by the Women’s Regional Consortium on Women, Skills and Barriers to Work⁶ as well as the many valuable lived experience examples provided by Melted Parents on social media.

² Women at the Heart of Public Consultation, A guide for Public Authorities and Women’s Organisations, WRDA, November 2017

https://wrda.net/wp-content/uploads/2018/10/WRDA_WomenAtTheHeartOfPublicConsultation.pdf

³ <https://www.wrda.net/projects/feminist-recovery-plan>

⁴ <https://www.communities-ni.gov.uk/system/files/publications/communities/dfc-social-inclusion-strategy-gender-expert-advisory-panel-report.pdf>

⁵ <https://www.wrda.net/childcare-for-all>

⁶ <https://www.womensregionalconsortiumni.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2024/12/Women-Skills-Barriers-to-Work-1.pdf>

2.3 Childcare and Gender Equality

A lack of affordable, accessible childcare disproportionately impacts on women.

While there have been improvements in women's participation in the labour market over the last number of decades, it is still the case that women perform the majority of childcare.

Research confirms the social norms that exist in relation to family life and the care of children. Women with any children in the family are 9 percentage points more likely than those without children in the family to be inactive to look after home/family. For each child under the age of 5 the likelihood of being inactive to look after home/family increases by 5 percentage points.⁷ This research makes the point that these relationships are not evident for men – men with dependent children are 1 percentage point more likely than their peers without dependent children in the family to be economically inactive to look after the home/family. The research also shows that women with the highest levels of education are also less likely to be inactive to look after the home/family than those with lower educational attainment and the same is not evident for men.

The most recent economic inactivity figures for Northern Ireland show how women continue to provide more care for the home and family limiting the time they have available to take part in the labour market and to improve their financial situation. The Northern Ireland economic inactivity rate is 26.8% a rate which is consistently above the UK average (21%) and the highest of the 12 UK regions highlighting the scale of the challenge in Northern Ireland. The female economic inactivity rate is 31% compared to 22.5% for men.⁸ In looking at the detail of economic inactivity it shows that nearly a third of women who were unavailable for work gave the reason for inactivity as family and home care (55,000 or 29%) and this was the least likely reason for male inactivity (at 7,000 or 5%).

⁷ Economic Inactivity Report 1: Literature, Context and Quantitative Analysis on Economic Inactivity in Northern Ireland; And A Review of the Welfare System in relation to Economic Inactivity in Northern Ireland, Queen's University Belfast and the Economic and Social Research Institute, October 2023 [Economic Inactivity in Northern Ireland - Report 1 \(economy-ni.gov.uk\)](https://www.economy-ni.gov.uk/economic-inactivity-in-northern-ireland-report-1)

⁸ Northern Ireland Labour Market Report, NISRA, November 2025 <https://www.nisra.gov.uk/publications/labour-market-report-november-2025>

These figures are all critical to the understanding of the need for accessible, affordable childcare to help women access training, education and work, to help address high economic inactivity levels in Northern Ireland, disadvantage and gender inequality. As the Gender Equality Expert Panel report⁹ highlights: *“it is clear that a Government funded childcare provision is fundamental to facilitating women’s participation and ability to access paid work, education and training. It is also crucial to the success to achieving progress towards gender equality in Northern Ireland.”*

“Childcare is one of the key things for women. It is one of the biggest barriers women face to taking part socially, politically and economically.”

(Participant at Women’s Regional Consortium Consultation Event)

As the consultation states 32% of families use grandparents or relatives for care, highlighting the importance of informal childcare within family networks. Often this informal childcare falls to women such as grandmothers who frequently take a step back from working to provide this care. There is little formal value placed on this childcare and the sacrifices often made by women to help address the lack of affordable, accessible childcare.

“If someone is not working to provide childcare there is no value to that work.”

“It’s a disgrace, it’s a grandparent penalty. My parents have worked their whole lives. My parents are both 70 next year and have worked their whole lives and paid into the tax system why should they have to give up their free time to mind my kids? That’s their life now, it’s so unfair.”

“Grandparents, often mostly women, are deciding to work less so they can help with some childcare and can swap about to help out. My mum is 70 and she has cut down on her hours to help me out.”

2.4 Cost of Childcare

The World Economic Forum has found that the UK has some of the highest childcare costs in the world.¹⁰ Compared with OECD member states (the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development), Northern Ireland is ranked third highest

⁹ Gender Equality Strategy Expert Advisory Panel Report, December 2020
<https://www.communities-ni.gov.uk/system/files/publications/communities/dfc-social-inclusion-strategy-gender-expert-advisory-panel-report.pdf>

¹⁰ <https://www.weforum.org/agenda/2023/07/highest-childcare-costs-by-country/>

for the highest share of average household income spent on childcare costs.¹¹ A Northern Ireland Childcare Survey report by Employers for Childcare (published in December 2023 and now unavailable online) has shown that childcare is the biggest monthly bill faced by 41% of families in Northern Ireland costing more than their mortgage or rent payments and for 64% of parents their childcare bill is their largest or second largest monthly outgoing.

The Northern Ireland Childcare Survey 2023 found that the cost of childcare has been rising and that it is impacting on parent's ability to work and their productivity while in work. The research showed that:

- 56% of parents are using means other than their income to pay for childcare including savings, credit cards and loans.
- 81% of parents report there is not enough provision of childcare in their area.
- Parents are reducing their working hours, passing up on opportunities for career progression and, in some cases, leaving work altogether because of difficulties affording or accessing childcare.
- 88% of parents have had to change their work arrangements due to the cost of childcare.
- More than three quarters (76%) are likely or very likely to change their working arrangements in some way due to childcare.
- Most parents using childcare (95%) report that childcare stress impacts on productivity at work, 61% report this is at least weekly.

Crucially, in terms of parent's ability to take up or stay in work and the ability to progress in their work the Employers For Childcare Survey found that:

- Parents in lower income households are more likely to have had to stop work due to the cost of childcare.
- 63% of stay-at-home parents said they would be able to get back into work if they could access more affordable childcare.

¹¹ Economic inactivity, key employment barriers and childcare costs potentially impacting those barriers: initial considerations for Northern Ireland, Northern Ireland Assembly, May 2024 [Assembly Research and Information Service Briefing Paper - Economic inactivity, key employment barriers and childcare costs potentially impacting those barriers: initial considerations for Northern Ireland \(niassembly.gov.uk\)](https://www.niassembly.gov.uk/assembly-research-and-information-service/briefing-papers/economic-inactivity-key-employment-barriers-and-childcare-costs-potentially-impacting-those-barriers-initial-considerations-for-northern-ireland/)

- 89% of working parents said being able to access more affordable childcare would impact on their career including enabling them to progress (63%), or to participate in education, training or skills development (48%).

The CEDAW Committee has also raised the issue of childcare costs specifically in Northern Ireland noting its concern *“that childcare costs remain excessive, particularly in Northern Ireland, which constitutes an obstacle for women to enter and progress in the workplace.”*¹² The Committee recommended that Government should ensure the availability of affordable and accessible childcare particularly in Northern Ireland.¹³

*“Failing to address the cost of childcare for so many years is a significant policy shortcoming that affects many different parts of our society, most intensely the wellbeing of women and children. It’s time that childcare was valued as a critical part of our social and economic infrastructure and taken seriously as investment in our future prosperity.”*¹⁴

We wish to highlight the flaws in the use of data from a Childcare Survey conducted by NISRA. This data averages out the cost of childcare including informal childcare provided at no cost by family members which does not provide accurate figures on the true average cost of childcare in Northern Ireland. Using this data to come to an average cost without differentiating between different childcare arrangements simply leads to misleadingly low averages. In addition, this calculation takes no account of the lost hours of work by those (often women) who reduce their working hours or give up work altogether to help care for their grandchildren/other children and equally takes no account of the cost of this work. As raised by our Women’s Policy Group colleagues, Employers for Childcare used to be the best authority on the costs of

¹² Concluding Observations on the eighth periodic report of United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland, CEDAW/C/GBR/CO/8, March 2019, para 45
https://tbinternet.ohchr.org/_layouts/treatybodyexternal/Download.aspx?symbolno=CEDAW/C/GBR/CO/8&Lang=En

¹³ Ibid, para 46

¹⁴ Northern Ireland Childcare Strategy: A Work in Progress?, Ulster University, January 2025
https://pure.ulster.ac.uk/ws/portalfiles/portal/217709883/Attached_standard_file-SPS-2023-0071_Formatted_article_file_31.10.24_AC_copy.pdf

childcare in Northern Ireland and the loss of this data is harmful to efforts to construct a useful Childcare Strategy.

2.5 Childcare as a Barrier to Work

It is clear that the high cost of childcare in Northern Ireland affects the ability of parents to work and that childcare costs act as a significant barrier to parents entering and staying in the workforce. When childcare is unaffordable it is predominantly women who step back from their careers, education and economic opportunities.

An OECD report¹⁵ states: *“Low quality or unaffordable childcare can be a significant hindrance to women’s labour market participation. Adequate childcare supply facilitates an earlier return to work after childbirth and provides the option for both parents to take on full-time work.”*

Research by the Women’s Regional Consortium¹⁶ found that over half of women surveyed cited childcare as their main barrier to work – 45% stated they were out of work because they are looking after children and 17% said the cost/availability of childcare was the main barrier for them.

In discussing the issues around caring for children the women talked about how expensive childcare is and how going out to work meant that most if not all of their wage went on childcare costs so it often felt pointless going out to work. Others were trying to get work which fitted around their child’s school day but that limited their working hours and the jobs they could apply for. Problems with accessing affordable childcare including for after schools and holiday periods were also reported. Mothers of children with additional needs reported significant barriers to being able to get suitable childcare for their children.

¹⁵ Promoting Gender Equality to Strengthen Economic Growth and Resilience, OECD Economics Department Working Papers No.1776, November 2023
[https://one.oecd.org/document/ECO/WKP\(2023\)29/en/pdf](https://one.oecd.org/document/ECO/WKP(2023)29/en/pdf)

¹⁶ Women, Skills & Barriers to Work, Women’s Regional Consortium, December 2024
<https://www.womensregionalconsortiumni.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2024/12/Women-Skills-Barriers-to-Work-1.pdf>

“If you’ve no childcare you can’t do nothing, you can’t train, you can’t go to work if you’ve no one to mind your kids.”

“I could walk into a job tomorrow because I do have the qualifications/experience which is sad really. I could apply for a job and walk into it tomorrow if I had the childcare in place.”

“For me it’s double hard. I have 4 kids and two of my sons have autism, one has severe autism so it’s hard to find reliable childcare to suit his needs. It’s hard to find the childcare for them both. It’s hard to manage 4 kids anyway – to find childcare it’s very, very hard. At this age my son would be expected to stay home by himself, look after himself, but he can’t because of his autism.”

“Round here the after schools clubs don’t pick up from schools. My son is in after schools today. He’s in school to 1.45, I’ll pick him up then and drop him off at 2.15 and that’s him until 4. But I have to do it, I need that half hour to do the pick-up.”

“Even if a child is in nursery/school you’ve still got 6 weeks of the summer to sort out. It’s a big thing the lack of cover over the summer holidays. You don’t have cover for things like mid-term, even for strikes, there’s no one to look after your kids.”

“I’m a single parent working full time but even with help through Universal Credit for childcare I’d be better off not working. I asked to go down to a 3-day week but my employer said no. I’m thinking of quitting until the baby is older.”

“Because we’re rural where we live is a big barrier. Jobs aren’t so local here so you have to go to the towns and then you need a full day childcare because of travel – between travel and childcare you’re working for nothing.”

“I have a child with a disability and it’s hard to find suitable childcare so I need to have quite flexible hours or be my own boss.”

“More affordable childcare, after schools clubs and school holiday cover is needed.”

“If the Government were to put more money into childcare they would have more women out working. It absolutely would make a difference having cheaper childcare. I have twins and it just doesn’t pay you to do it. You’re working to pay your childcare costs and you’ve nothing left.”

“Need more free courses and childcare for people to be able to go to courses. If you’re a parent and you don’t have childcare you can’t come.”

“If we don’t have childcare how are women going to get into the labour market, stay in the labour market or afford to be full time in the labour market.”

(Quotes taken from Women’s Regional Consortium Research on Women, Skills & Barriers to Work, December 2024)

2.6 Childcare Costs, Low-Income and Poverty

High childcare costs have even greater impacts for low-income families. A lack of affordable childcare acts as a significant barrier to increasing the earnings of low-income parents and/or a cost that keeps them in poverty.

A report by Employers For Childcare and the Joseph Rowntree Foundation entitled ‘Tackling disadvantage through childcare in Northern Ireland’ (January 2024, currently unavailable online) stated that the system has reached *“breaking point”* and that: *“Lower-income families are least likely to benefit from quality childcare, reducing household incomes as a result of working fewer hours or stopping work altogether. Disadvantaged children are therefore missing the benefits of quality provision.”* The report stressed that the early learning and childcare system must be well designed to remove disadvantage rather than making it worse and that at present: *“high costs and barriers to access make it difficult for parents to afford the childcare they need, which can prevent them generating income through work.”*

The Northern Ireland Childcare Survey 2023 showed that of parents from lower income households, 17% with a household income of up to £20,000 reported that they had had to stop working altogether due to the cost of childcare compared to just 1% of parents with a household income of over £70,000.

High childcare costs and poor financial gains from working is often the reason why many low-income mothers do not enter or remain in work. Lone parents often face persistent barriers in the labour market with limits on the number of hours they can work due to childcare needs, low pay and a greater likelihood of being in working poverty.

Current childcare provision ensures that low-income families are kept out of the labour market or stuck in poor quality jobs with the cost of childcare a significant

strain on their household budgets. This situation ensures that child poverty continues to blight the lives of many children. **The Women's Regional Consortium believes that it is vital that the final Early Learning and Childcare Strategy gives children from low-income families the best chance of growing up free from poverty. We believe that low-income families must be prioritised in this Strategy.**

“The benefits system forces women with children to go out to work. But there is a lack of jobs available and the jobs that are available are often the lowest paid which means that women can't afford childcare or you end up paying to work.”

“I am a lone parent, there is a lack of suitable jobs in the area, expensive childcare and I have mental health issues. I would struggle financially if working full-time with childcare costs, rent and regular expenses so it isn't really a viable option.”

“I can't afford childcare as I don't get any support with it. I am lucky I have family to look after my kids. Without them I would need to leave work. My salary is not enough to pay the mortgage and childcare without some help.”

“I have two children under four. The cost of childcare is extortionate. It is our biggest outgoing. Despite help from grandparents we struggle to make these payments.”

“I am a single parent and I have two children. I live in a rural area and I used to have a good job in the city. I had to give up the job as I couldn't get good quality, affordable childcare outside normal office hours to suit the job and the travel times to and from work. I had to leave home early to get to work and was home later because of the travel time involved. I took a job closer to home so that I could drop the children off and pick them up from school. The job suits my home situation but is about a third of the salary I used to have.”

“I couldn't afford childcare so I had to come out of work. I can't afford crèche fees I'm on my own. I've no help. It literally sent me into a spiral of depression. It left me feeling so inadequate not being able to work, I've worked all my life. I do want to work but I can't afford to, I can't.”

“I have to consider childcare, I have three kids and no one to mind them so I have to be able to work weekends/evenings in holiday times. I would have to take a lot into consideration before I could take work. There may not be a benefit in me taking a full time job with the cost of childcare – you are tied. I feel that this is more an issue for women.”

(Participants at Women's Regional Consortium Consultation Events)

2.7 Investment in a Caring Economy and Care Skills

The Commission on a Gender-Equal Economy have proposed the creation of a ‘Caring Economy’¹⁷ based on gender equality, wellbeing and sustainability as a way to build back better after the Covid19 pandemic. A Caring Economy would prioritise care for each other and for the environment in which we live. Women’s Budget Group research¹⁸ found that a 2% GDP investment in care (for example, social care, childcare, parental leave and care leave) creates double the number of jobs for women and almost as many for men than the same investment in construction. Investment in free, universal childcare especially returns almost all of its initial investment.

Eurostat data suggests that the care industry is 30% less polluting (in terms of Greenhouse Gas emissions) than the construction industry and that the education industry is 62% less polluting than the construction industry.¹⁹ This makes investment in this type of social infrastructure economically, environmentally and equality sound. We suggest that investment in a Caring Economy including care skills would help build our skills base, address skills shortages in the social care sector, promote gender equality and have positive impacts for a stronger and more sustainable economy.

2.8 What women said about childcare provision in Northern Ireland

“Affordable childcare, payments open to everyone to help with costs of childcare or even the 30 hours free childcare that’s already in place in England.”

“Help with childcare payments for working families so that they can benefit from their earnings and not be working to pay for childcare.”

“More help with childcare costs. Have a look at what’s happening in other countries.”

¹⁷ Creating a Caring Economy: A Call to Action, Commission on a Gender-Equal Economy, Women’s Budget Group, October 2020

<https://wbg.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2020/10/WBG-Report-v10.pdf>

¹⁸ Investing in the Care Economy: A gender analysis of employment stimulus in seven OECD countries, International Trade Union Confederation, March 2016

[Investing in the Care Economy - International Trade Union Confederation \(ituc-csi.org\)](https://www.ituc-csi.org/en/publications/investing-in-the-care-economy)

¹⁹ WBG calculations from Eurostat data

<https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/data/database>

“More help needed for childcare costs and support from employers with childcare.”

“More should be learned from England, Wales, Scotland and down South around childcare and supporting parents who work to pay for childcare”

“A robust and genuinely helpful childcare strategy to help people into work and retain their earnings.”

“Free childcare places.”

“Affordable and accessible childcare to enable parents, especially single mums, to work or study.”

“Free childcare for working mothers in low-income jobs.”

“Costs need to be capped such as childcare, rent and the cost of school uniforms.”

“Childcare costs are a rising concern and as a professional, I still had to take a career break for 2 years as my wage was not covering my childcare bill.”

“Free childcare or a community focused childcare model that does not rely on subsidies which many families don’t feel the benefit of.”

“Affordable childcare to allow women to go back to work.”

“You’re still paying an absolute fortune for childcare even with some help. Some places are charging £65 a day. How does it cost this? Most places don’t do the child discount, I’ve twins.”

“I’m on Universal Credit now and we get 85% of the childcare paid but you still have to find the rest to pay it. It’s so confusing. It’s trying to keep that money aside and you have to pay it upfront.”

“Right now my childcare bill is over £2,000 a month on childcare for 3 kids. People can’t afford to have more kids. So, I’m left with £300 a month for all my food shopping.”

“I can only work part time because I’m disabled and my whole part time wage was going on childcare. I work in the NHS and you’re working trying to help people but my whole part time wage was going on childcare so there was nothing at the end of it.”

“I had to come out of work because of the cost of childcare.”

(Participants at Women’s Regional Consortium Consultation Events)

3.0 Consultation Questions

Theme 1: Supporting Children in their Early Years

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

We fully support Objective 1.1 – Deliver universal, full-time pre-school provision (22.5 hours) but we do not believe that the actions outlined under this objective will achieve universal provision of early years education.

We are particularly concerned about the Department's proposal to remove the current statutory admissions criteria which prioritises children from socially disadvantaged circumstances applying for funded pre-school education places. The draft outlines that this will be consulted on in September 2026 yet at the same point in time states that funded pre-school education places will be available for only half of all funded preschool education places. The draft goes on to say that by September 2029 only 75% of funded pre-school places will be available across Northern Ireland.

We agree with the Women's Policy Group who have said that despite the Minister indicating that the social disadvantage criteria will not be needed as a result of universal, full-time provision it is clear that provision will not be universal before the social criteria will be removed. This leads to a situation where some children who are most in need will be unable to avail of this prioritisation causing well known issues for their educational attainment and long-term health.

We also note that the Category 2 actions under this Objective are subject to available resources which potentially could mean that by September 2029 there could be less than 75% provision leaving even more low-income children and families to suffer and fall behind their better off peers.

The Women's Regional Consortium believes that the actions listed under this Objective will contribute to the widening of developmental gaps and exacerbate the class divide. An academic report into the Consequences of the Cuts to Education for Children and Young People in Northern Ireland²⁰ has recommended:

²⁰ The Consequences of the Cuts to Education for Children and Young People in Northern Ireland, Ulster University, Stranmillis University College, Queen's University, Belfast and Newcastle University, June 2023
<https://www.stran.ac.uk/wp-content/uploads/2023/06/The-Consequences-of-the-Cuts-to-Education-for-Children-and-Young-People-in-Northern-Ireland-Final.pdf>

“A suite of funding for early intervention and further sustained support should be reviewed and, in light of that review, reinstated and supplemented to address educational disadvantage as a result of socio-economic factors. Short sighted cuts and ‘savings’ made during these formative years will ultimately result in further and greater public spending to address the resultant societal issues in the future.”

“Because I’m not working I don’t qualify for any schemes to help with childcare. Until you get back into work you’re at a loss before you even start. You have to pay for everything up front. If you do get a job in Derry there are waiting lists for some creches sometimes around 6 or 7 months. When you get a job it’s trying to line the job up with the availability of childcare that sometimes just isn’t there.”

(Participant at Women’s Regional Consortium Consultation Event)

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

We strongly support the intentions outlined in Objective 1.2 – Deliver targeted early learning and childcare services for children facing disadvantage and additional needs. However, we do not believe what is outlined in the draft Strategy will achieve this.

We do not need to repeat the longstanding evidence and research that quality early years provision is vital for the prospects of children facing disadvantage in our society. Indeed, the draft Strategy states: *“High-quality early years education has been proven to mitigate the effects of disadvantage, improving long-term academic, social, and economic outcomes.”* Prioritising these services for children facing disadvantage not only improves the life chances of the children impacted but is an invest to save approach which will result in long-term savings across Government.

The Women’s Regional Consortium believes that it is critically important that the final Early Learning and Childcare Strategy contains robust actions to deliver early learning and childcare services for children facing disadvantage and additional needs. We do not believe the actions included in the draft will deliver effectively on this objective.

It is important to stress that the Women’s Regional Consortium fully support the funding increases to Sure Start, the Pathway Fund and Toybox proposed including the provision of annual inflationary updates. These are important programmes which have faced increasing demand for their services. However, investing in these programmes alone is insufficient to deliver for the needs of children facing disadvantage and additional needs.

There are currently 38 Sure Start projects across Northern Ireland with a postcode lottery of support. Many families in need outside these catchment areas are not able to access these services. While we appreciate that the draft Strategy outlines increases to funding to expand this provision there will still be disadvantaged children unable to access these services.

We reiterate our support for the important services provided by Sure Start, Toybox and the Pathway Fund but it is not a substitute for full-time early years provision. As highlighted by the Childcare for All Coalition, these interventions often do not provide full time spaces, facilitate parents to access education, training or work or provide the same range of educational opportunities to children as those in full-time early years provision. The Women's Regional Consortium believes it is unfair to separate out disadvantaged children in this way and leave some without the supports they need to *"shape the trajectory of a child's holistic development and build a foundation for their future."*

"Sure Start is good but it's a postcode lottery to get it."

"Sure Start does good things for early learning and socialisation but if a parent wants to go and do a course they're not going to keep your child for you. It's not helping access education, it's not childcare. You can't leave your child."

"Sure Start is a good service but it doesn't provide what's needed – for women to get educated, to get back into jobs, to provide for their families – that's what WCCF does."

"People have heard about Sure Start and they know it's considered to be a good thing so something that proposes expanding it then people think that's great but they don't realise it's not the same thing as actual childcare and it's not going to help everyone."

"I come from a big estate in Lisburn and you'd think there would be a Sure Start but there isn't. They're putting these wee bits in the Strategy but not going into the detail of how it won't work for everyone."

(Participants at Women's Regional Consortium Consultation Event)

We are deeply disappointed that this section of the draft Strategy does not include any reference or details about the Women's Centre Childcare Fund (WCCF) which does so much to address disadvantage as illustrated below.

Women's Centre Childcare Fund (WCCF)

The Women's Centre Childcare Fund (WCCF), established in April 2008 and funded by the Department for Communities, enables Women's Centres to provide childcare places that are 100% supported for the most disadvantaged children in our communities. These childcare places ensure that disadvantaged children have an

opportunity to experience a childcare setting, to socialise, interact, play and learn in a supported environment. These supported places also give women the opportunity to access a wide range of programmes available in their local Women’s Centre including training and education, back to work programmes, counselling, health and wellbeing programmes and a range of advice services.

For some women (including ethnic minorities and lone parents) the prospect of increased economic participation can depend on the availability of appropriate integrated childcare and access to education/training opportunities at community level. A lack of appropriate integrated childcare and community education acts as a fundamental barrier to the engagement of socioeconomically disadvantaged women in education, training and in employment. This is the kind of integrated provision that is provided by WCCF and which is so vital to these women.

WCCF delivers far more than childcare. It gives children a strong start, supports women to train and work, strengthens families’ wellbeing and builds healthier, more connected communities. As WCCF links childcare with education, mental health support, employability and inclusion it offers real value for money. It is one investment that creates benefits across the whole community. The following table highlights the wide-ranging benefits of the WCCF.

Benefits of the Women’s Centre Childcare Fund (WCCF)

Area of Benefit	What WCCF Delivers	Why It Matters for Communities
Children	Safe, nurturing early learning; social skills; confidence; early language; school readiness.	Children start school ready to learn, build strong relationships, and develop early skills that shape lifelong outcomes.
Women in Training & Education	Reliable childcare that allows women to attend courses, gain qualifications and build confidence.	Women can improve their skills, move into better jobs, and break cycles of poverty.
Women in Employment	Affordable, flexible childcare that fits real working patterns.	More women can work, increase their income, and support their families.
Mental Health & Wellbeing	Wraparound support, peer connection, reduced stress from childcare pressures.	Families feel supported, less isolated, and more able to cope with daily challenges.
Community Strength	Centres act as trusted hubs offering childcare, support, advice, and connection.	Stronger, safer, more connected communities where families can thrive.

Area of Benefit	What WCCF Delivers	Why It Matters for Communities
Inclusion & Equality	Support for lone parents, migrant families, low-income households, and those facing barriers.	Reduces inequality and ensures every child and parent has a fair chance.
Value for Money	Low-cost, high-impact childcare linked with education, wellbeing, and employment support.	One investment delivers multiple outcomes: better child development, stronger families, and increased economic participation.

Despite the importance of this childcare model in tackling disadvantage and promoting equality WCCF continues to be administered on an annual basis and has been subject to Departmental cuts/austerity measures since 2012 which resulted in the overall original allocation being reduced by just over 20% up until 2022. Over the last three years the Department has increased this funding slightly to those Women’s Centres in receipt of it to help them to meet ‘Cost of Living’ increases. While this is positive there is insufficient investment in WCCF to address existing levels of need. The Women’s Regional Consortium believes that this is a hugely important area of funding for women and children in disadvantaged areas. We argue that any progress on childcare provision in Northern Ireland must invest in low cost/no cost childcare provision for marginalised women in disadvantaged and rural areas.

Yet, the draft Early Learning and Childcare Strategy only mentions WCCF **once** and that singular mention is as part of a list of Existing Programmes in Appendix Two. The Women’s Regional Consortium are disappointed that it has not been given greater focus within the draft Strategy as an important model for the delivery of childcare for children facing the most disadvantage.

The Women’s Regional Consortium recommends that the WCCF should be specifically included in the final Early Learning and Childcare Strategy as a funding and delivery model, taken forward on a multi-year basis, to provide for a planned, longer-term response to the need for childcare provision for children facing disadvantage and to advance gender equality.

“WCCF has many benefits but also helps with the simplest of things. One parent said my child never sat at the dinner table, we never had a family dinner and now because the childcare and skills they’ve learned my child sits at the dinner table. It’s even those wee small things that count.”

“WCCF is such a good model, there’s no doubt about its many benefits.”

“Women have come into the Centre that have left employment because of mental health pressures because of stress and come in to the Women’s Centre and get their confidence back so they can go back into the labour market again.”

“WCCF provides many benefits and women have access to the huge range of supports provided by the Women’s Centres.”

“As a Centre we do what we do because we’re changing lives and saving lives. But it’s hard. It’s really disappointing that WCCF has not been mentioned in the Strategy – it should have been mentioned more.”

“If they took WCCF away or reduced it there’s nothing to replace it, nothing to support women in the community to do training/education. They should be doing the opposite of what they’re doing and investing in WCCF.”

“WCCF is delivering way beyond what they’re putting into it – why don’t they scale it up?”

“There are a lot of gaps in the Strategy – WCCF does not get the acknowledgement it needs and it’s not getting the support it needs. We’re how many years down the line and we’re still expected to meet our targets yet the funding doesn’t reflect that – the funding stays the same. It’s just a real struggle.”

“They’re getting a bargain with the funding they’re providing for WCCF – the value for money is huge! Why can they not invest in it? If the model of WCCF works why are they not championing it and expanding it?”

(Participants at Women’s Regional Consortium Consultation Event)

The following quotes from Women’s Centre Derry and case studies from Atlas Women’s Centre, Lisburn and First Steps Women’s Centre, Dungannon clearly show the wide-ranging benefits of WCCF and its importance to women and children facing disadvantage.

“I used the creche in Women’s Centre Derry and got my Maths and English through the Centre while the baby was in creche. If I didn’t have the creche I wouldn’t have been able to do it. Without that support I couldn’t have done my Maths and English and the other courses I have done through the Centre too”

“I’ve done courses through Women’s Centre Derry while my child has been in the creche. Not only am I getting the education side of it but my child is getting support from others not just me all the time as well. There’s that side of it too. The staff are brilliant, they’re unbelievable. All the staff in the creche and outside in the Centre are fantastic. It would be so said if they didn’t get the funding that they deserve.”

Sarah's experience of WCCF

I came to Atlas Women's Centre in 2022. I was referred by my Health Visitor. At the time I was struggling with anxiety and post-natal depression. I had a baby girl and a son in primary school.

The Health Visitor told me to check out Atlas and at the start I was very apprehensive. The Health Visitor told me they had a creche and that it was fantastic. She said my daughter could go into the creche and there are qualified staff there and I'd be in the same building and I could go and sort my head out basically!

It took me a while to do it – it was 2 months before I decided I'm going to do this I'm going to walk through the doors. I came in and there was a sense of relief immediately and I was met with a hug.

My daughter went into the creche and she loved it. The girl who worked there at the time – they just bonded and my daughter couldn't wait to get in to see her.

I did some one-to-one support and women's wellness while my daughter was in the creche. When that stopped and I started to feel a wee bit better it was like now I can do a wee bit of training and develop a skill set.

The Centre Manager suggested an OCN in Community Development – it was an accredited course and she also suggested an OCN in Perinatal Mental Health and that was through the Maternal Advocacy and Support Project so I did those.

My daughter was in the creche making friends – she even got a boyfriend! Her speech and language was phenomenal. Her social skills improved so much. She would have been locked in the house with me otherwise – when I say I was really paranoid I didn't go out I wouldn't even go into a shop. It took me 5 attempts to go into a chemist when my daughter was a baby and I couldn't do it I had to ring my mum and get her to come out of work to do it. It wasn't a joke, I was really in a bad way. So the fact that in the space of a year and half to two years I was transformed like that was unbelievable for me.

My daughter got two and half years in the creche and she excelled there. Then I got a wee voluntary position after doing all my training and accreditation and transformation. And then I got a paid job!

Access to free community childcare through the creche was absolutely vital for me. As a single mother of two, with one child who has additional needs, I simply could not have afforded private childcare. My parents both work full-time and I don't have a wider support network, so there was no one who could step in to help. At that time my mental health was severely impacted and poverty was a very real part of my life. Without the free childcare provided by the Centre, I would not have been able to attend support sessions, take part in training, or begin rebuilding my confidence. The affordability of community childcare removed a huge barrier and made it possible for me to access the help and opportunities that ultimately changed my life.

Does the model work? Does it sound like it works? It really, really works. We know it works so they need to expand on the model that already exists – pushing it out far and wide so more women like myself can get it! They're making it very hard for the working class and people who are unemployed to access childcare. The WCCF model works and Government need to hear what we have to say about it. We need the Strategy to reflect that.

Anna's experience of WCCF

I came to Dungannon from Ukraine in May 2022 with my 4-month-old daughter. When I arrived, I did not know how to access childcare and I could not afford to pay for it. This made it very difficult to think about learning or working.

In September 2022, I joined an ESOL class (English for Speakers of Other Languages) at First Steps Women's Centre (FSWC). My daughter, who was 7 months old at the time, attended the crèche. Having access to childcare made everything possible for me. I could attend classes, focus on learning, and begin to rebuild my life.

Before coming to FSWC, I felt very isolated and alone in a new country. At the Centre, I met other women and felt part of a community. The staff were very kind, and it helped so much that some could speak my language. This made me feel safe and understood.

Over the past four years, I have progressed from Entry Level 2 to now studying GCSE English. Two years ago, I got a part-time job in a local coffee shop. The crèche supported me again by looking after my daughter while I worked. Without this childcare, I would not have been able to take this opportunity.

The crèche also helped my daughter. She became more confident, social, and ready for school. She is now in primary school and is very happy.

This childcare was funded through the WCCF programme. For me, it was the key to everything — learning English, finding work, and feeling part of society. The fact that FSWC Creche had 3-4 staff who could speak multiple languages was a good sign for me. It showed that the Centre were caring and child focussed wanting the best for both our children and their mothers.

Without the crèche at First Steps, I could not learn English or go to work. This support changed my life and my daughter's future. I hope this kind of childcare funding can continue, so other women like me can have the same chance.

“It’s not just about the education at Atlas Women’s Centre, it’s also support through crisis situations. The support is for the whole family not just the mum. Atlas provides me with freedom – free training, opportunities to progress and achieve and childcare. Atlas puts the enjoyment back into learning because you feel like you want to learn and you know that your child is learning in the same building. You feel a part of a family when in Atlas.”

“I like coming into Women’s Centre Derry because it’s local and I don’t have to pay for a taxi. It provides childcare and the numbers in the rooms are much smaller. I just feel easier coming into the Women’s Centre.”

“I prefer to do training in Windsor Women’s Centre – besides the fact the environment is friendly, it’s not intimidating, there’s childcare or flexibility if you have to bring your child. There’s understanding that you have these outside responsibilities.”

“Coming to Windsor Women’s Centre is better for me, there’s childcare in the Centre. My house is not so far so it’s close for me and the time is flexible. There are a lot of courses and opportunities here and I get great support from the project workers who advised me to apply for a Masters which I hope will get me a good job here. The workers in the Centre understand us and they know our needs and circumstances.” (minority ethnic project)

(Participants at Women’s Regional Consortium Consultation Events)

We also note under this objective that many of the actions are already in place and that the new actions “*will be prioritised next subject to available resources.*” If there are insufficient resources available then the actions outlined may not be progressed.

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

The Women's Regional Consortium agrees with the expansion of developmental provision for children aged 2-3. We repeat our concerns that the actions outlined in the draft seek to "*progressively extend*" provision so that universal provision is only envisaged in the Category 3 Actions (April 2030 to March 2034).

This leaves a gap for a number of years meaning that many children will miss on this important provision which will undoubtedly impact on their learning and development.

We note that the extension of access "*will be prioritised next subject to available resources.*" If there are insufficient resources available then the actions outlined may not be progressed.

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

The Women's Regional Consortium supports high quality provision across all early learning and childcare providers. As the draft Strategy states: "*High-quality ELC supports children's development, helps families to thrive, and strengthens communities. When children have access to nurturing early experiences, they are more likely to do well in school and in life.*" We support all efforts to provide and standardise high quality provision so that all children can reach their full potential benefiting their families and communities. We share the concerns of the Childcare for All Coalition who have stated: "*as standards improve for those children with access to this kind of provision, those children who will miss out will fall further behind.*"

We note that many of the actions are already in place and that the new actions "*will be prioritised next subject to available resources.*" If there are insufficient resources available then the actions outlined may not be progressed.

Theme 2: Supporting Families with their children's learning and childcare costs

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

The Women's Regional Consortium fully supports the objective of making childcare more affordable. As the draft Strategy states: "*It is a vital enabler of child development, financial stability, parental employment and inclusive economic growth.*" We know that making childcare more accessible and affordable would help many women access training, education and work and help address unacceptably

high levels of economic inactivity particularly for women. We refer the Department to Section 2.3 of this response.

We are concerned that the actions outlined under this objective will fail to result in making childcare more affordable. The Women's Regional Consortium do not believe that the Northern Ireland Childcare Subsidy Scheme (NICSS) is the best vehicle for making childcare more affordable and the Scheme is the basis for the majority of the actions outlined under this objective. The NICSS excludes parents who are not working, those in receipt of Universal Credit and those in receipt of Childcare Vouchers. It therefore excludes those on the lowest incomes including those working part-time and in precarious roles and in many cases these will be women. We refer the Department to Section 2.6 of this response. If investment continues in this Scheme there is a risk that it will lead to ongoing price increases in childcare further reducing affordability for families on the lowest incomes.

We share the concerns raised by the Childcare for All Coalition that the NICSS does not include a cap on costs and this has meant that many providers have raised costs to match (in some cases to exceed) the value of the subsidy thereby negating any savings to parents. Therefore, continuing to invest in this Scheme without adding in the protection of a cap on costs will not result in making childcare more affordable for parents and in some cases quite the opposite. We are disappointed therefore that the draft Strategy states that consideration was given to capping fees but was not included in the Strategy and is being *"kept under consideration."*

We point the Department to the model adopted in the Republic of Ireland which includes a cap on costs. We note that the draft Strategy only briefly mentions capping fees and is largely dismissive of this option. The draft Strategy refers to *"significant challenges with such an approach, some of which are now emerging in jurisdictions which have adopted this model"* and includes an example of provider withdrawal. However, information provided by the Department of Children, Disability and Equality²¹ shows that many of the providers who chose to withdraw from the scheme have returned to the core funding:

A relatively small number of service providers have regrettably chosen to withdraw from Core Funding over the years for a variety of reasons. However, uptake of Core Funding remains strong. The fourth year of Core Funding began on 1 September and as of 1 December there were over 4,570 services signed up to Year 4 of Core Funding (93% of all eligible services), a 5 per cent increase on this time last year. This is the highest number of Partner Services in Core Funding at any point since the scheme was launched in 2022 and the number continues to grow.

²¹ Information provided in email correspondence to the Alliance Party

As of 3 November 2025, there were 5,035 services listed as being open on the Early Years Platform (where our Departments childcare schemes are administered), of which 177 (4%) had left Core Funding at one point over the lifetime of the scheme to this date and continued to operate outside of this scheme. A further 415 services (8%) had left Core Funding at one point over the lifetime of the scheme to this date but later rejoined and were signed up to the fourth year of the scheme on this date. The overwhelming majority of services, 4,157 or 83%, have continued to participate in Core Funding from the date on which they first signed up for the scheme.

It should be noted that of the 592 services that have left the scheme at one point, some 415 services were contracted to Core Funding as of 3 November 2025 - meaning over 70% of services who left the scheme at one point have now returned to Core Funding.

A breakdown of the engagement with Core Funding is below in tabular format:

<i>Engagement type</i>	<i>Number of active services</i>
<i>Continued Participation</i>	<i>4,157</i>
<i>Left and since returned</i>	<i>415</i>
<i>Left and remained out</i>	<i>177</i>
<i>Did not participate</i>	<i>286</i>
<i>TOTAL</i>	<i>5,035</i>

While help towards the cost of childcare through Universal Credit is to be welcomed it also remains insufficient to ensure that families on the lowest incomes can access the childcare they need. Help with childcare through Universal Credit can cover up to 85% of eligible childcare costs with monthly caps in place. However, there is no acknowledgement that this leaves 15% of the cost to be met by claimants which for many low-income households is still an unmanageable amount.

Using the example in the draft Strategy it shows that a low-income family on Universal Credit would still need to find £246.12/month for childcare²², a figure which is simply out of reach for many of these households. This is particularly evident

²² Page 35: *A family with one child attending a day nursery with a cost of £1,278 per month would receive the capped support of £1,031.88. This would reduce their net payment to £246.12 per month*

when you consider research by Trussell and Joseph Rowntree Foundation²³ which shows that around 5 in 6 low-income households on Universal Credit are currently going without essentials.

In addition, childcare fees have to be paid upfront. While there is help available to cover the costs of upfront childcare fees, in some circumstances, through the Adviser Discretion Fund there have been issues around lack of awareness of this help. Women's Regional Consortium research on Women's Experiences of the Cost-of-Living Crisis in Northern Ireland²⁴ pointed to a lack of awareness around sources of financial support for childcare such as the Adviser Discretion Fund.

All this points to the lack of affordability of childcare especially for those on the lowest incomes and the current actions proposed in the draft will do little to address the affordability issue.

We note that the Category 2 Actions "*will be prioritised next subject to available resources.*" If there are insufficient resources available then the actions outlined may not be progressed.

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

The Women's Regional Consortium agrees with the need to improve the information and support available for families. Access to information and advice which is free, accessible, holistic and independent ensures that people can get the right advice for their circumstances in a way that best suits their needs.

Like many other areas including social security, money advice and other financial support information on Childcare and Government supports can be complex. Many people struggle to find out the information they need, have difficulty understanding the complexity of these systems due to the language used or experience other accessibility issues such as an inability to access information online. The Women's Regional Consortium regularly hears from women and families who have missed out on help they were entitled to because they either did not know about it, because they did not understand the information about it or because they did not know where the information about it was located.

²³ <https://www.jrf.org.uk/social-security/guarantee-our-essentials-reforming-universal-credit-to-ensure-we-can-all-afford-the#:~:text=around%20%20in%20%20low,people%20from%20going%20without%20essentials.>

²⁴ Women's Experiences of the Cost-of-Living Crissi in Northern Ireland, Women's Regional Consortium & Ulster University, June 2023
<https://www.womensregionalconsortiumni.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2023/06/Womens-Experiences-of-the-Cost-of-Living-Crisis-in-NI-2.pdf>

The focus on the provision of online advice and information by Government while helpful to some people must not be the sole means for accessing information and help. Simply referring people to online information/advice may be particularly difficult for those who are the most marginalised. Access to information and advice must take into account the difficulties that some people experience with online information including a lack of skills, not having the physical technology itself or access to broadband (particularly in rural areas) to access the information and advice they need online. Women's Regional Consortium research with local women has often found that women did not find out about the help available to them from government websites but rather from the woman sat next to them in their local Women's Centre or from their friend or relative or through an advice worker in an advice centre or Women's Centre.

We note the draft Strategy includes an action to develop a user-friendly digital platform to improve access to information for parents and providers. For the reasons outlined above we urge caution against the provision of solely online advice and information. In our focus group work with local women we hear many complaints about information only being available in online formats. Government must include advice and information provision in other formats including in person.

Women's Regional Consortium research on the impact of austerity/welfare reform on women²⁵, women and debt²⁶ and the impact of Universal Credit on women²⁷ all highlighted the importance of access to free, independent advice. Given the impact of austerity/welfare reform, the complexity of support systems and issues around poor financial literacy and capability there has never been a greater need for access to independent advice. The Women's Regional Consortium has consistently recommended the need for increased funding for community level information, advice and advocacy work that reaches out to those who are the most vulnerable and marginalised to ensure they can access the advice they need and their rightful entitlements.

Under Objective 2.2 we note that the draft Strategy does not mention the important advice and information services provided by the Community and Voluntary Sector. These free, independent and community-based services are trusted to provide information and advice in the way that is most accessible to those who need it.

²⁵ Impact of Ongoing Austerity: Women's Perspectives, Women's Regional Consortium, March 2019 <http://www.womensregionalconsortiumni.org.uk/sites/default/files/Impact%20of%20Ongoing%20Austerity%20Women%27s%20Perspectives.pdf>

²⁶ Making Ends Meet: Women's Perspectives on Access to Lending, Women's Regional Consortium, February 2020 <http://www.womensregionalconsortiumni.org.uk/sites/default/files/Making%20Ends%20Meet%20-%20Women%27s%20Perspectives%20on%20Access%20to%20Lending.pdf>

²⁷ The Impact of Universal Credit on Women, Women's Regional Consortium, September 2020 <http://www.womensregionalconsortiumni.org.uk/sites/default/files/The%20Impact%20of%20Universal%20Credit%20on%20WomenRevised.pdf>

Information and advice is provided through trusted local organisations and often caters to the specific needs of their service users, for example, community advice centres and Women's Centres.

“You need someone with knowledge to help people with the system. It is so complex, the language used confuses people.”

“A lot of the letters are confusing, it's the way they word things and I don't understand them. I panic and worry about what they mean so I need help.”

“It doesn't make sense to me – it's so confusing. People don't understand the system they just want to get the help they need.”

“People need advice and they are cutting funding for advice when people need it. People need to get independent advice from someone that understands the system.”

(Quotes taken from Women's Regional Consortium Research on the Impact of Austerity/Welfare Reform on Women, March 2019)

We agree with the Childcare for All Coalition that while more information is always helpful we believe that those who do not use childcare do so because they cannot afford it rather than because they lack information and advice about it.

We note again that the Category 2 Actions *“will be prioritised next subject to available resources.”* If there are insufficient resources available then the actions outlined may not be progressed.

We also note that the Category 3 Actions in this section (those that may take longer to implement - April 2030 to March 2034) includes some important actions in relation to information and support to the parents of SEN children. Given the state of Special Educational Needs provision in Northern Ireland which has been described as *“under extreme pressure, unable to respond to the scale of need and the complexity of issues that children are presenting”*²⁸ we believe that these actions should be prioritised.

²⁸ <https://www.niccy.org/review-of-sen-provision-too-little-too-late/>

Theme 3: Supporting the Early Years Sector and workforce

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

The sustainability and capacity of the Early Learning and Childcare sector is vital to the success of this Strategy. Alongside our colleagues in the Childcare for All Coalition we have stressed that the childcare workforce has been insufficiently supported both in terms of pay, working conditions and career development for many years. We therefore welcome that the draft Strategy intends to address these issues.

However, as outlined by the Childcare for All Coalition the draft Strategy fails to differentiate between the issues that present in different parts of the sector and to tailor its interventions appropriately. As is clear throughout our response we believe that investment in community-based childcare models should be prioritised. These models effectively meet the needs of those from disadvantaged backgrounds and provide excellent return on investment as evidenced by the WCCF – detailed in our answer to Question 2. We repeat our disappointment that there is nothing in the draft Strategy around investment in community models such as the WCCF which provides an ideal opportunity to invest in the workforce.

We support the Childcare for All Coalition's assertion that there is a need to consider the research used to develop these plans for the sector. This research assumes that many families will continue to rely on informal childcare within family networks such as grandparents or relatives for care (32% used grandparents or relatives). However, wider societal changes may impact on this including more older relatives working longer due to cost-of-living increases and the raising of the retirement age as well as higher levels of inward migration from people who may not have local family connections.

“Because our parents’ generation are working longer and a lot of them are not retired they can’t help with childcare, that’s how it is now.”

“It’s such a class thing as well as the people who can afford to retire early generally are the ones who earned more in their working life. Many others are working to the last minute as they can’t afford not to. In NI there is the real assumption that there will be some family support with childcare when often there isn’t.”

(Participants at Women’s Regional Consortium Consultation Events)

This Objective proposes to develop a Strategic Childcare Accessibility Fund focusing on a number of important areas. However, there is a lack of detail about this Fund in the draft and it makes it difficult to assess whether or not it will help to achieve

Objective 3.1. Considerably more detail is required on this Fund to ensure it will be able to effectively help address the areas of focus listed. Worryingly this is included as a Category 2 action which could be anytime to March 2030 and that it also states that Category 2 Actions “*will be prioritised next subject to available resources.*” If there are insufficient resources available then the actions outlined may not be progressed at all.

We are also concerned that providing annual inflationary uplifts to core early years funding is listed as a Category 2 action which could be anytime to March 2030 and “*will be prioritised next subject to available resources.*” Without providing annual inflationary uplifts to funding many settings will have to continue to meet rising costs from their own reserves putting pressure on these valuable services. This must be prioritised to ensure the viability of this provision.

“We have a social enterprise – the affordability of keeping the creche open – you wonder sometimes why are we doing this? But we’re keeping all these people in jobs. We’re not making any money. When we started it we thought the money we would make would run the Women’s Centre but it basically washes its face. You try and take the good outcomes the social outcomes – there’s so much good comes out of it – being there for the kids you can’t put a price on that.”

(Participant at Women’s Regional Consortium Consultation Event)

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

We strongly agree with the need to enhance accessible Early Learning and Childcare for children with additional needs. However, without specific actions and committed funding it is difficult to determine how this will be achieved.

It is clear from research that the numbers of children presenting with additional needs is growing and with that comes increasing complexities and demand on services. This illustrates the need to expand the workforce, to ensure early identification and support and for this work to be prioritised.

Providing proper support to children with additional needs comes with additional costs including increased staffing numbers, specialist training and additional equipment. Therefore, it is critical that adequate investment follows the actions under this Objective to ensure that they go beyond mere words and ensure much better provision for children with additional needs.

Once again we are concerned at the number of Category 2 actions under this Objective which could take place anytime to March 2030 and “*will be prioritised next subject to available resources.*” If there are insufficient resources available then the

actions outlined may not be progressed at all. Given this is an area of increasing need and so critical to the children and families concerned we believe there should be prioritisation of actions and funding in relation to this.

“There are gaps in the Strategy – for children with additional needs. There’s no mention of support for women’s groups when it comes to ratios for having children with additional needs. You have to cut down your numbers otherwise it affects the safety of the children.”

(Participant at Women’s Regional Consortium Consultation Event)

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

We fully support the need to enhance the early years infrastructure through a skilled and valued workforce. The Women’s Regional Consortium wants to see the value of childcare work recognised with decent pay, terms and conditions and opportunities for career progression. Childcare is a vital part of our economic infrastructure and the skills and talent required to work in the childcare sector must command the necessary investment as a critical enabler to the functioning of a successful economy. It is essential that childcare is properly and practically supported, both now and into the future.

“I did childcare to become a classroom assistant to get paid less than someone working in McDonalds. You shouldn’t have to train for a full year and pass an exam for a job that pays less than working in a supermarket.”

(Participant at Women’s Regional Consortium Consultation Event)

As we have previously outlined the childcare workforce has been insufficiently supported both in terms of pay, working conditions and career development for many years. One of the main outcomes of this Strategy is that *“Families can access more affordable childcare that meets their needs.”* If this is to be the case it must not be at the expense of pay and conditions for workers in the sector. In order to improve the situation for the childcare workforce including attracting workers to the sector, maintaining staff morale and reducing turnover, there must be significant action in investing in training, rewarding skills and experience and in professionalising childcare roles.

However, we do not believe that the actions under this Objective will achieve these outcomes. We are again concerned that many of the actions fall into Category 2 actions which could take place any time to March 2030 and *“will be prioritised next subject to available resources.”* If there are insufficient resources available then the actions outlined may not be progressed at all. Given the considerable recruitment

and retention issues within the childcare sector continuing to delay dealing with the important issues of pay, terms and conditions, training and qualifications will only worsen the situation and further deepen the crisis.

We note an action to “*promote the establishment of a sectoral representative body to support the professionalisation of the childcare sector.*” The Childcare for All Coalition have raised many questions which are not answered in the draft Strategy including who will be responsible for developing this body, will it look at pay, terms and conditions, will there be a link between this body and the NI Executive’s commitments to develop ‘good jobs’ as set out in the Department for the Economy’s Good Jobs Bill, how will the voice of workers be represented in this body?

Childcare workers are currently represented by a number of trade unions however given the fragmented nature of the sector combined with retention problems it is a notoriously difficult sector in which to organise. Historically, this means there has been no collective bargaining as there has been within the education sector. Trade Unions must therefore be part of this process in order to adequately represent the views of childcare and early years workers.

We share the concerns of the Childcare for All Coalition that the draft Strategy outlines no actions to avoid the risk that better pay and conditions for staff will result in rising childcare costs. As suggested by the Childcare for All Coalition this can be avoided by removing the reliance on the private sector and moving towards a community-based model of childcare. Investment in community-based childcare sees strategic investment go directly to where it is needed the most – to tackle disadvantage, provide appropriate childcare spaces and invest in the childcare workforce.

Women’s Centre Childcare Fund – Workforce Challenges and Solutions

The WCCF childcare workforce is under real pressure most of which comes from it only being funded one year at a time. This creates a cycle of insecurity that affects staff, children and families. Staff don’t know if their job will still be there next year, so many leave for more stable employment. That makes it hard to keep experienced people and even harder to recruit new staff. Women’s Centres are therefore unable to plan long-term or support staff in gaining qualifications because funding stops and starts every year. This leads to stress, burnout and constant turnover.

This also has impacts for the children as they lose trusted adults and have less stability. For families, especially those who rely on Women’s Centres, it means fewer childcare places and less support.

The solutions are simple and community-focused: move to multi-year funding, offer secure jobs and fair pay, invest in training and progression and recognise community

childcare as essential local infrastructure. With stable funding, Women’s Centres can keep skilled staff, offer more places and give children the consistent care they need.

The following table outlines the challenges faced by WCCF, what it means in practice and the solutions to these challenges.

Challenge	What It Means in Practice	Community-Focused Solution
Year-to-year funding	Staff don't know if their job will still exist next year. Centres can't plan.	Move to multi-year funding so centres and staff have stability.
Hard to keep good staff	People leave for better pay and secure contracts in schools or private nurseries.	Provide fair pay and secure contracts in community settings.
Difficult to recruit new staff	Few people apply for jobs that only feel safe for 12 months.	Offer longer-term posts to attract new workers.
Limited training and progression	Centres can't commit to qualifications or long-term development. Staff feel stuck.	Fund training, qualifications, and progression routes over several years.
Stress and burnout	Constant uncertainty affects morale and well-being. Staff feel undervalued.	Provide stable funding, well-being support and recognition of the role.
Impact on children and families	Staff changes mean children lose trusted adults and consistency.	Ensure stable staffing through secure funding and better retention.
Reduced childcare places	Vacancies and turnover force centres to cut numbers. Families lose access to all support services.	Support for recruitment and retention of staff.
Families in need lose out most	Vital support for parents who can't access any other childcare provision.	Protect and expand community-based childcare as essential local infrastructure.

“There’s so little detail on when the improvements for staff will happen in the Strategy. It sounds lovely on paper and if you’re not in the sector you’re not going to recognise those gaps.”

“Staffing is really difficult there’s a high turnover and it’s hard sustaining staff and morale. We’ve done all in our power to stop that from happening but it continues.”

“It’s hard to keep good staff in this environment. People leave for better pay, secure contracts in schools or private nurseries. In the past year we have lost three childcare staff members to better jobs and even moving out of childcare as well.”

“Providing secure contracts in community settings would be a massive help.”

“Difficulties in recruiting new staff – when you’re applying for a job that isn’t even 12 months – it’s impossible!”

“Some children often get settled by a particular member of staff because that member of staff is in the creche every day. When you lose staff, it has a real negative effect on the children and that can have a negative effect on the mum too – if the child has difficulty settling then mum may not continue. If the parent doesn’t come back, they miss out potentially on things like foodbank vouchers, the clothes we have available and all the other supports – the one-to-one support – the interaction and the children’s interaction too. A lot of parents don’t see other parents, don’t talk to adults if they are not here – and their children too – without here it can lead to a lot of isolation.”

“There are lovely words in the document but there’s no detail. There’s no detail about the training they are planning to give to childcare workers. No specifics like by this year we will deliver this amount for childcare workers. It’s more like if we have the money we’ll think about doing this so they won’t end up doing it at all. There’s so little detail about when the staff improvements will be.”

(Participants at Women’s Regional Consortium Consultation Event)

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

Overall Concerns:

- **A lack of detailed costings** – the cost of achieving the actions detailed in the Strategy is considerable. The draft however states that many of the actions *“will be prioritised next subject to available resources.”* It is widely known that the Department’s financial position is very challenging. Therefore, the lack of detailed costings is concerning and there is nothing in the draft Strategy that allows us to determine what will be prioritised in the event that the Department does not get the funding it needs for this work. It is also unclear due to a lack of costings whether inflation has been considered and how that may impact on the delivery of the actions contained in the draft.

- **A lack of specifics** – in too many places within the draft actions are outlined briefly without sufficient detail to ascertain if they will have the desired impact. For example, Objective 3.1 proposes to develop a Strategic Childcare Accessibility Fund which in principle sounds positive. However, the details are so sparse that it is simply impossible to determine whether this will help achieve the Objective. It is not clear if the money will be strategically invested or if it is intended to be a grant accessible to eligible families.
- **A lack of co-ordinated timings** – a number of the actions in the draft rely on other actions being completed and in place in order for them to work as intended. For example, we are extremely concerned about the proposed action to remove the social disadvantage criteria which relies on universal early years provision of 22.5 hours being available to all parents. If these two actions are not completed in tandem with the certainty of adequate funding it cannot be guaranteed that there will not be a considerable gap through which the most disadvantaged will fall.
- The draft Strategy makes only passing reference to gender equality when it should be central to the Strategy as childcare is one of the main barriers to economic equality for women.
- We do not believe that the draft Strategy as it stands will help the most disadvantaged children and families access the early education and childcare they need.
- There is no recognition of the Women’s Centre Childcare Fund (WCCF) as a model of best practice. Beyond a singular mention of the WCCF the draft contains no explanation of the fund, any guarantee over its maintenance and no indication of any future expansion.
- The draft Strategy relies heavily on the NI Childcare Subsidy Scheme. However, the existing model of this Scheme is not working with providers raising their costs every time the subsidy increases. This will only serve to increase the cost of childcare for everyone. Instead changes to this model are needed including introducing a cap on costs.

We support the Childcare for All Coalition’s model for childcare provision Our Childcare Strategy should be ambitious in scope and should seek to prioritise and invest the most money into building a new community-based childcare model that is designed to meet the needs of all those in the childcare equation. This model will be best placed to recognise childcare as an essential part of our public infrastructure worthy of proper, strategic investment. We therefore propose the Women’s Centre Childcare Fund (WCCF) as a model for community-based childcare – see our answer to Question 2.

Childcare Strategy Checklist

As a member of the Women's Policy Group and Childcare for All Campaign we have worked on a checklist to ensure that any draft Early Learning and Childcare Strategy achieved all that we need from our childcare infrastructure. We have graded the draft Strategy against our priorities and the results are shown in the graphic below but it's clear that it needs to do better.

IT'S CLEAR YOU
HAVEN'T BEEN
PAYING ATTENTION...

Women's Policy Group NI

0/9

CHILDCARE STRATEGY CHECK-LIST



Will all children have access to high quality childcare that meets their educational and developmental needs in a safe, nurturing environment supporting them to achieve their full potential, including children with additional needs including SEN, language barriers, etc.?

PARENTS ON BENEFITS CAN'T
EVEN ACCESS NICSS!

IN FACT, CHILDREN WITH
ADDITIONAL NEEDS WILL LOSE
OUT MORE!



Will no child live in poverty as a result of a parent's inability to access or stay in paid work or due to the high cost of childcare?

THE DEPT. CONSIDERED
AND REJECTED CAPS -
WHY?

NICSS IS HAVING THE EFFECT OF
RAISING CHILDCARE PRICES, WHICH MAY
PUSH MORE PARENTS OUT OF WORK.



Will all types of childcare settings be enabled to deliver high quality, sustainable, accessible childcare across a range of settings through strategic investment by Government?

NO MENTION OF INVESTMENT IN COMMUNITY
CHILDCARE INFRASTRUCTURE LIKE THE WOMEN'S
CENTRE CHILDCARE FUND (WCCF)...



NO
TIMELINES,
COSTINGS,
INVESTMENT
PLANS...

Will the childcare workforce be valued and supported through proper investment in skills development and career progression, and will workers be recognised as professionals and see that recognition reflected in fair pay and decent terms and conditions?

I WANT TO GIVE YOU A GOOD SCORE, BUT YOU NEED TO SHOW HOW YOU'RE GOING TO DO IT!



Will specific support for community based childcare be increased and expanded such as that delivered through the Women's Centre Childcare Fund (WCCF) model as this model best meets the needs of low-income women and especially those who live in areas of increased deprivation?

THE ONLY MENTION OF THE WCCF IS IN AN APPENDIX - NOTHING ON ITS
EXPANSION, ITS RESOURCING, OR RECOGNITION OF ITS GOOD PRACTICE...



Will all parents be able to access, stay in and progress in paid work, or education and training facilitated by affordable, accessible and flexible childcare?

GIVEN THE CURRENT COST OF CHILDCARE AND THAT THE PROPOSALS IN THIS
STRATEGY WILL CONTRIBUTE TO RISING COSTS WITHOUT NEW PLANS TO TACKLE
THIS, PARENTS WILL NOT BE ABLE TO ACCESS ANY OF THE ABOVE.



DEFINITELY NOT!

Will all parents be supported to undertake the amount of paid work that suits the needs of their family with adequate financial support to live free from poverty?

THE STRATEGY IS ACTUALLY
MAKING IT WORSE BY ROLLING
BACK PRE-SCHOOL PROVISION.



Will there be a significant reduction in the gender pay gap and social inequality through ensuring that no-one's employment options are constrained by lack of access to affordable, flexible childcare?

THIS STRATEGY WILL NOT REDUCE
GENDER INEQUALITIES, ESPECIALLY
FOR LOW-INCOME WOMEN!



Will economic growth be stimulated through employers having access to a wider pool of skilled, experienced potential employees for recruitment?

THERE WAS AN OPPORTUNITY HERE TO STIMULATE ECONOMIC GROWTH, BUT LACK
OF AMBITION, FAILURE TO APPLY OR EXPAND ON BEST PRACTICE, AND NO
INVESTMENT PLAN RESULT IN A MISSED OPPORTUNITY...UNLESS CHANGES ARE MADE!