



Response to Early Years (0-6) Strategy

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1.0 Introduction

1.1 The Women's Centres Regional Partnership (WCRP) is a partnership of four lead regional women's organisations linking with fourteen frontline women's organisations across Northern Ireland to provide support and services to women living in disadvantaged areas.

1.2 Vision

WCRP's vision is "our vision of communities where women are recognised and valued as equal partners working toward a future based upon shared values of equality, participation and inclusion."

1.3 Mission

WCRP's mission is "To work in partnership to support and strengthen the voice of community based women's organizations."

1.4 Background

The four key lead partners of the Partnership are the Women's Resource and Development Agency (WRDA), Women's Support Network (WSN), Northern Ireland Rural Women's Network (NIRWN) and The Women's Centre, Derry. The fourteen women's organisations are spread across Northern Ireland with seven from the Greater Belfast and Lisburn area, four in the North West and three in Dungannon, Magherafelt and Craigavon. Together the WCRP seeks to develop and strengthen a regional infrastructure which will support community based women's organisations across Northern Ireland.

- To build a strong, effective and inclusive partnership for the benefit of partners and stakeholders;

- To advocate for the sustainability of frontline services for WCRP partners and stakeholders;
- To promoting best practice and quality standards training, education, advice and childcare services in the women's centres;
- To Influence policy relating to women's lives by identifying and publicising emerging issues facing women in disadvantaged areas.¹

1.5 WCRP welcomes the opportunity to respond to this consultation on Early Years (0-6) Strategy issued by the Department of Education. Arguably there are clear differences between how the Early Years 0-6 strategy is viewed by DE and the women's sector. We believe there is a substantial gap in the strategy in the value of early years education providers situated outside the formal educational structure. The strategy does not give any recognition or acknowledgement to the role of women's centres in preparing children for education.

2.0 Comments

2.1 WCRP notes that the document is gender neutral and that whilst there are references to recognising and respecting the role of parents, that there has been no recognition of the role of mothers in the document. This is surprising given that section 3.2.1 of the evidence paper accompanying the strategy highlights that investment in early education and care addresses the needs of mothers as well as benefitting children in allowing women to "continue education, careers and learn new job skills."² Furthermore 6.2.6 of the evidence paper states that "Early childhood policies should be concerned not only with education and care services but also linked to issues of women's employment, child development, child poverty, health and social welfare."³ WCRP recommends that that the role

¹ <http://www.wcrp.org.uk/mission.php>

² DE(2010) Early Years (0-6) Strategy Evidence Based Paper, pg 18

³ DE(2010) Early Years (0-6) Strategy Evidence Based Paper, pg 63

of women as recognized in the evidence paper is given emphasis in the strategy.

2.2 WCRP welcomes that the document refers to the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) in Annex 3. We would like to see greater emphasis given to international human rights standards in the Strategy as we believe an Early Years strategy needs to be fully located within a human rights framework. We note from the information in Annex 3 that some of the objectives of the Strategy would partially meet the standards set out in the UNCRC. WCRP notes with concern that the section which sets out the UNCRC makes no reference to Article 2 of the Convention which sets out the principle of non discrimination.⁴ WCRP recommends the inclusion of Article 2 of the UNCRC given one of the department's objectives is equity of access to early years services. The document alludes to Article 12 of the UNCRC which sets out the right of children to express their views freely in matters that affect them. However we understand that consultation with children has not taken place. WCRP also notes that the Early Years Strategy is only partially compliant with a number of the articles of the UNCRC. For example Article 18 (3) of the UNCRC is set out in the document states that "State Parties shall take all appropriate measures to ensure that children of working parents have the right to benefit from childcare services and facilities for which they are

⁴ Article 2 of the UNCRC contains two paragraphs:

1. States Parties shall respect and ensure the rights set forth in the present Convention to each child within their jurisdiction without discrimination of any kind, irrespective of the child's or his or her parent's or legal guardian's race, colour, sex, language, religion, political or other opinion, national, ethnic or social origin, property, disability, birth or other status.

2. States Parties shall take all appropriate measures to ensure that the child is protected against all forms of discrimination or punishment on the basis of the status, activities, expressed opinions, or beliefs of the child's parents, legal guardians, or family members.

eligible.” The document states that objectives 2 and 4 of the strategy partially comply with Article 18. However we would argue that this is not the case as these objectives do not address childcare apart from a scant reference in objective 4 to the childcare strategy. WCRP therefore recommends that the strategy is fully compliant with international human rights standards. WCRP asks the department for clarity as to how and when they will consult with children on the draft strategy.

- 2.3 WCRP notes the Strategy emphasises education, however the evidence paper accompanying the strategy makes reference to Early Education and Care (ECEC) which has been defined as “all services providing education and care for children below compulsory school age or before starting school.”⁵ WCRP is disappointed that reference to Early Education and Care have not translated into the draft strategy as the document makes reference to Sure Start, but there is a lack of reference to other provision for example, crèches, daycare, home based childminding, mothers and toddlers groups and summer schemes which can often provide a first step onto the ladder of play and development. WCRP recommends that DE addresses this gap. This strategy takes an approach that there is a split between Early Years Education and Childcare. WCRP endorses a briefing paper by CINI which highlights that services which are not integrated can exacerbate inequality.⁶ WCRP asks the department for clarification when the decision was taken to split these policies. WCRP supports CINI’s call for the establishment of lead Ministerial responsibility for fully integrated early years and childcare services.⁷ This needs to be underpinned by a

⁵ DE (2010) Evidence Based Paper to Inform Early Years Strategy, 36. Available at the following link http://www.deni.gov.uk/early_years_evidence_based_paper.pdf

⁶ CINI (2010) Briefing Paper on DE (0-6) Early Years Strategy, 6, available at http://www.cini.org.uk/events_specific.aspx?dataid=446670

⁷ Ibid, pg 7.

strong duty of co-operation by all departments and we believe this will show the government's commitment to invest in early years.

- 2.4 The strategy states on page 21 that DE needs to address strengthening the links on an area basis between early years providers (from birth to age six), at points of transition (currently Sure Start 0-4), pre- school (3-4) and foundation stage (4-6). Other than references to Sure Start for 0-4 years, this strategy appears to primarily focus on 3-6 years rather than 0-6. WCRP notes and welcomes the department's commitment on page 24 to expand the reach of Sure Start and the Programme for Two Year Olds which was introduced as a pilot within Sure Start in 2007. WCRP wishes to highlight that Sure Start, which is an excellent model is targeted at the 20% most disadvantaged wards in Northern Ireland, therefore children in 80% of wards are unable to access this provision. This implies a lack of intervention and support, in particular to children with disabilities in this 80% of wards. It should also be noted that Sure Start provision varies from area to area. Places are limited and waiting lists are long.
- 2.5 However Sure Start is not the only model as there is an existing network of community organisations delivering first class early years services. WCRP wishes to highlight the important role of community based women's early years and childcare provision. Women's centres are well established organisations situated within areas of social and economic disadvantage in Northern Ireland. The services provided in the centres are unique and offer a holistic approach to service provision which is particularly important given that Sure Start does not cover all areas. A recent report by WCRP has highlighted a range of early years and childcare provision in thirteen women's centres located across Northern Ireland including free childcare places for women accessing education and training, after schools provision, places for social services referrals, Sure start childcare, respite

childcare and summer scheme childcare.⁸ In 2009, there were 1364 individual children registered for childcare provision within women's centres, 4914 childcare places and 9828 hours provided on a weekly basis. The majority of the thirteen women's centres support children in the age range of 0-4 years.⁹ Where Sure Start stops providing services to children and families at the age of 4, women's centres provide this support through to the age of 6 and beyond. This is vital for families with children who require additional support.

- 2.6 This report published by WCRP also highlights the benefits of provision in community based women's centres including enhancing children's learning and development, addressing child poverty, improving physical and mental health and promoting social integration. Women's centres community based childcare provision also benefits mothers and families including promoting health and well being, positive family relationships and assisting in identifying developmental issues. Women's centres childcare provision often supports children on the child protection register, supporting them to stay within the family unit. The women's centres also are involved in early intervention work in partnership with social services, Sure Start and other service providers, particularly with children with disabilities. Furthermore the findings of the WCRP childcare research indicated the women's centres provided high quality service provision and contribute to building an effective childcare infrastructure in providing placements for students. The funding programmes which enable the women's centres to provide childcare end in 2011 and without these resources, the centres would be unable to sustain childcare provision.¹⁰ WCRP notes that there is no reference in the strategy to how DE will

⁸ There are fourteen frontline stakeholder organisations, of which 13 are women's centres. WCRP (2010) Childcare Mapping and Research Report, Pgs 1- 3.

⁹ Ibid, Pg 14

¹⁰ Ibid, Pg 6

collaborate with the Department for Social Development (DSD) and the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development (DARD) on early years services. However DSD funds the Women's Centres Childcare Fund and DARD funds the Rural Childcare Programme. WCRP recommends that DE addresses explicitly in the strategy how it will collaborate with DSD and DARD on early years services. WCRP also recommends that DE recognises the important role of community based provision, particularly provision in the women's sector. This is vital given that Sure Start often relies on community providers to provide these services. If these services are not funded, there is potentially a risk that Sure Start would not be able to meet its objectives.

- 2.7** The strategy highlights that "there can be no assumption, at this point of substantial new resources becoming available and that it may be a case of making better use of existing resources." It is vital that resources are made available to sustain existing early years services provision. WCRP again draws the department's attention to Article 4 of the UNCRC which states "with regard to economic, social and cultural rights, state parties shall undertake such measures to the maximum extent of their available resources."¹¹ WCRP also notes that the Committee on the Rights of the Child has highlighted the importance of public investment in "services, infrastructure and overall resources specifically allocated to early childhood."¹² Women's centres have to have more staff ratio per child than education and library board provision and there is a need to support resources to sustain provision. WCRP strongly recommends that the Minister for Education makes a case for investing in Early Years services and seeking new resources in the forthcoming Budget. Investment in Early Years services will assist the department meet its objective in equity of

¹¹ <http://www2.ohchr.org/english/law/crc.htm#art2>

¹² Committee on the Rights of The Child General Comment No 7, para 38 CRC/C/GC/7/Rev.1

access to quality provision across all sectors. Investment in early intervention and support for early years is vital particularly as these are the most crucial years for the development of child, educationally and socially.

2.8 WCRP notes that the Draft Strategy makes reference to children who start with reduced life chances because their families may be more at risk, they may live in disadvantaged areas, live in rural areas or live in social isolation. However the strategy makes no reference to issues such as domestic violence and sexual abuse, issues arising from the legacy of the conflict, parental reliance in prescription medication and parental alcohol abuse which have in some cases been experienced by children accessing provision in some of the women's centres. WCRP strongly recommends that these issues are addressed in the final draft of the strategy. Whilst we welcome the commitment to supporting work with parents, this is restricted to DE funded services. However this work is firmly established in the community, for example in the women's centres such as in depth family support.

2.9 WCRP also notes that there is no reference to the forthcoming child poverty strategy which is currently under development and has to be published by March 2011. This is surprising given that links between low levels of child poverty and the existence of universal early childhood services was highlighted in the evidence paper.¹³ OFMDFM have recently published a pre-consultation paper on a child poverty strategy and have been conducting public events. It is vital that the issue of child poverty strategy is also addressed in this draft Early Years document, given that the Department will have responsibilities in contributing to the

¹³ DE (2010) Evidence Based Paper to Inform Early Years Strategy, 31. Available at the following link http://www.deni.gov.uk/early_years_evidence_based_paper.pdf

development of a child poverty strategy. WCRP also wishes to highlight that anti poverty strategy "Lifetime Opportunities" has not been referenced, which we find surprising as this strategy also includes objectives for Early Years in the 0-4 range.¹⁴ WCRP notes that there are no references to the recent policy and economic appraisal on options for a childcare strategy or the recent consultation on a Programme for Cohesion, Sharing and Integration which we believe indicates a lack of joined up thinking and WCRP strongly recommends that DE addresses this gap.

2.10 The document states on page 27 that the department needs to address the contribution of Early Years Provision to the wider Executive's consideration of childcare policy. Whilst this is welcome, it again indicates a split between early years education and childcare services. It is also unclear from the document how the department views its role in a future childcare policy, for example would the DE view itself as having a lead role? WCRP again reiterates the need for fully integrated early years and childcare services. WCRP also seeks clarification from the department as to how it views its role in relation to the development of childcare policy.

2.11 The Draft strategy states on page 24 that DE needs to address "qualification levels, professional development and access to specialist support for the early years workforce in the interest of greater equity between the statutory and non statutory providers and of raising standards." The document subsequently states that DE will work with DEL and ESA towards raising the minimum level qualifications in DE funded Early Years settings including Sure Start to an NVQ level 3. However we believe this will cause disparity in the workforce across the sector,

¹⁴ OFMDFM Lifetime Opportunities: Government's Anti Poverty and Social Inclusion Strategy for Northern Ireland , pg 15

compound inequity and create barriers thus restricting the improvement of quality of services for children in the 0-3 age range.

2.12 WCRP also wishes to highlight the role of the women's centres in contributing to a childcare infrastructure. Ten out of the 13 women's centres offer placements to students on NVQ, BTEC, HND and degree level courses.¹⁵ Furthermore women's centres childcare staff have availed of training opportunities including higher NVQ level courses.¹⁶ WCRP welcomes this commitment to partnership working in relation to raising the skills of the childcare workforce. However WCRP strongly recommends that the childcare workforce across the board should have access to a professional career path. This is vital to ensure high quality childcare provision and to attract and retain a highly skilled childcare workforce in the statutory/private/voluntary and community sectors. However frequently the staff in the women's centres are unable to attend free training opportunities in contrast to statutory providers which close for professional development days or bring in substitute staff. For women's centres these are not viable options and we recommend consideration is given in the strategy as to how this will be addressed.

2.13 WCRP notes that there are no references in the draft strategy to Traveller children and few references in the draft strategy to children with disabilities and children from rural areas despite the evidence paper referring to these particular groups of children. Furthermore, there is little reference to children from ethnic minority groups in the draft strategy. Children from ethnic minority groups often access provision in the women's centres and frequently do not have English as their first language. Women's centres are fully inclusive and often seek innovative

¹⁵ WCRP (2010) Childcare Mapping and Research Report, Pg 18.

¹⁶ Ibid.

ways to address barriers that women and children face. These children are practically invisible in the strategy but are often the most vulnerable. There is also no reference to screening or an EQIA accompanying the document. WCRP recommends that DE clarifies that a screening process has been undertaken in relation to the strategy and urges DE to undertake an EQIA to determine if there are particular groups of children and parents who potentially could be adversely impacted by these proposals.

Conclusion

WCRP welcomes the opportunity to respond to this consultation document. Whilst welcoming this consultation, we have offered some constructive recommendations as to how it could be improved. We are happy to further discuss this response if required.