

# A Response to: Learning to Learn: A Framework for Early Years Education and Learning

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## Introduction

1.1 The Women's Support Network (WSN) welcomes the opportunity to respond to this consultation.

1.2 The Women's Support Network (WSN), established in 1989, is a regional organisation that works across all areas of Northern Ireland. It includes in its membership community based women's centres, groups and organisations, with a concentration in disadvantaged areas. WSN is a charitable and feminist organisation, which adopts a community development approach. We provide a range of support and services to 63 community based women's centres, projects and infrastructure groups and 26 associate members drawn from across the community and voluntary sector who support women, families and communities. (see Appendix 1).

1.3 Our members provide a wide range of women-centred front line services across Northern Ireland, including:

- Specialist Advice
- Childcare and Family Support
- Counselling, Support and Advocacy
- Complementary Therapies
- Training & Education
- Health & Wellbeing Programmes
- Personal Development & Employment Support
- Volunteering, Leadership & Empowerment

1.4 WSN aims to achieve social, political and economic justice through the promotion of the autonomous organisation of women. The Network aims to strengthen the collective voice of women's groups and to promote and develop networking opportunities, to enable collective action and to impact upon policy and decision making processes. WSN provides an accessible, feminist, relevant and high quality support service and resource for its member groups. The Network is also an important information resource on issues relevant to community based women's organisations and for other infrastructure groups, nationally and internationally.

1.5 Over the past 30+ years, the community based women’s sector has developed a range of front-line services such as childcare, support, advice, and education & training services in response to the needs they identified at a grass roots level. Women’s groups continue to meet the particular needs of women and their children living in areas considered to be some of most affected by the conflict, and recognised as some of the most disadvantaged areas across Northern Ireland today.

1.6 Network members are actively engaged with their local communities, cross-community initiatives and regional structures throughout Northern Ireland.

1.7 The WSN and Children in Northern Ireland (CINI) jointly chair the Early Years Strategic Alliance (EYSA) which assembles representatives from the childcare and women’s sector who work with and for children in their early years and their respective families.<sup>1</sup>

## **2. Comments**

2.1 The Women’s Support Network (WSN), as an organisation representing women’s centres, projects and infrastructure groups drawn from across the Northern Irish community, welcomes the opportunity to respond to the Department of Education’s revised proposals for the way forward for early years education and learning. Furthermore, the WSN commends the Department’s commitment to raising standards in education and reducing educational underachievement for the many young people facing numerous barriers to learning. We further applaud the determination to deliver high quality services to young people and their families and the assurance that every child will have the opportunity to reach their potential.

2.2 The WSN is delighted with the Key Action (1.5) which states that ‘the Department will collaborate with other departments to work towards a common goal of improving outcomes for children’. For many years, the WSN has repeatedly called for a more systematic, integrated approach to cross-departmental working.

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<sup>1</sup> Early Years Strategic Alliance Manifesto [http://www.ci-ni.org.uk/downloads/EYSA\\_Manifesto.pdf](http://www.ci-ni.org.uk/downloads/EYSA_Manifesto.pdf)

The WSN would be interested to know how the Department intends to realise this commitment? We would recommend the possible setting up of an inter-departmental committee with representatives from DE, DHSSPS, DSD and DARD, not dissimilar to the 2007 Inter-Department Project Board and would ask how this would fit within the confines of the Delivering Social Change framework? The introduction of a committee would pave the way for a continuous commitment to early years learning across all relevant departments and would ensure that future consultations which relate to early years, or children and young people, will not be released as an isolated document lacking reference to and proper regard for already existing policy and legislation. In essence, integrated working at government level enables an alignment of goals, maximisation of resources and more efficient delivery of services.

2.3 WSN wishes, at this point, to raise a concern about the length of the consultation period. Guidelines state that the acceptable period for a consultation exercise is 12 weeks. The assigned period for this document (8 weeks) was inadequate for those interested parties wishing to respond and give appropriate recommendations. Furthermore, releasing Learning to Learn in December and allowing it to take place over a holiday period, shows a lack of real understanding for the fact that those most interested in this consultation (parents, childminders, childcare workers) would not likely have the time to assemble a meaningful response.

### **3. Specific Comments**

#### **3.1 A Vision of Children's Rights**

*'Children and young people are valued and respected at all levels of our society and have the right to have their voices sought, heard and acted upon' (Article 12 UNCRC)*

3.1.1 The WSN is delighted that Learning to Learn acknowledges the importance of the principles of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child and the Rights of Persons with Disabilities. These principles ensure that young people are recognised as having rights and a voice and thus, are vital for informing and adding weight to any child related policies. The Executive must continue to ensure full compliance with the UNCRC and UNCRPD. Moreover, the 2005 UN special early years report

encouraged countries to recognise young children's right to have government invest fully in education, to provide high-quality, developmentally concise and culturally pertinent programmes and services and to support the main aspects of good child rearing and early childhood development. The UN Committee highlighted the fact that the right to education begins at birth and is closely linked to young children's right to benefit from a standard of living adequate for healthy child development (Article 27). Important too are the principles, identified by the Institute of Child Protection Studies, which the WSN feels, the Executive should take due cognisance of, when evaluating whether the wellbeing and protection of the child is truly at heart of child related policies and procedures. After extensive research, the Institute identified four overriding themes, which are pertinent to child centred practice. These themes recognise the importance of:

- recognising critical time frames in childhood and adolescence including assisting children and young people as early as possible – early in the life of the child and early in the life of the problem;
- taking into account the developmental needs of children and young people;
- providing children and young people with appropriate opportunities to participate in all aspects of child protection interventions which affect them; and
- promoting a collaborative approach to the care, education and protection of children, including the strengthening of networks that are critical to their wellbeing.

**At the beginning of any child related policy document, the Department should ensure that the principles of the UNCRC are given proper recognition and emphasis.**

### **3.2 Early Childhood Education and Care**

3.2.1 The primary focus of this consultation document is education. There has been little done to emphasise the fundamental need for a more integrated approach to early childhood development, namely a clearer focus on both education and care. Integrated early years' centres that combine education with care and have a higher proportion of trained childcare workers, promote better intellectual and social and emotional outcomes for children, particularly amongst disadvantaged children (McCarthy & Morote, 2009; Sammons et al., 2008; Sims, Guilfoyle & Parry, 2006). In

fact, it has been shown that real quality can be found across all types of early years settings; however quality was higher overall in settings integrating care and education and in nursery schools (Sammons et al, 2008). Moreover, it is important to note that, in many European countries, it is theoretically problematic to represent the care and education of young children as two separate unrelated aspects because they are simply not distinguished from each other.

3.2.2 The WSN feels frustration and dismay at the failure, on the part of the Department, to recognise the fact that, quality day-care facilities, which provide the foundation of children's learning and development, are an integral part of early years education and/or children's first experience of the educational environment, (see 3.5). Interesting to note that, subsequently, the Department contradicts this statement (see 4.7) and recognises that opportunities for learning can be found in the voluntary sector ie child-minding facilities and day-care.

3.2.3 The Department notes, under 3.7, that there is a need to respond to the increasing number of pre-school children presenting with special needs care (e.g speech impediments or a hearing difficulties), which, we remind the government, is a service frequently provided by day-care services. Often these day-care centres will refer children, who they identify as possibly needing extra assistance, to specialist services and this is done prior to children entering the formalised school system.

3.2.4 The need to focus on both education and care becomes apparent once again in cases where, for example, a mother works outside the home. In such cases as these, the outcomes for young children would be much more adequate, if they were to receive consistent care and education in the same location, simultaneously, rather than to experience the disruption and unnecessary hassle of moving between separate and successive childcare and nursery education regimes, for example. Mothers, especially those from disadvantaged backgrounds, would further benefit with regard to employment opportunities, from the increased ease of access and a less tense and stressful arrangement that offered care and education in one place, instead of the complicated and pressured arrangements women often have to make.

3.2.5 The Department should also consider the reality that a properly integrated early years strategy will, over time, be more cost-effective from an implementation

standpoint. A well structured single system of early education and care will reduce major overlap and duplication of a different range of services.

### **3.3 Policy Context**

3.3.1 Section 2.8 of the consultation document states that the education service is being shaped by a number of wider Executive policies and early years education and learning services assist in the delivery of a range of outcome for children. As already mentioned, the importance of collaborative working and inter-department communication is essential. The WSN would also like to state that the potential of this early years framework will only be realised if it relates to and takes account of all relevant policies being developed within, not only the Executive, but also at UK and EU level.

### **3.4 Raising Standards**

3.4.1 The WSN, like Children in Northern Ireland, are dismayed that this part of the early years' framework fails to provide any actions that address or cater for children with disabilities. The UNCRPD recognises that we are all equal. Disabled people have the same rights as everyone else to freedom, respect, equality and dignity.

3.4.2 The WSN, on a practical note, would welcome standardised, properly structured education inspection processes across all education and learning environments.

### **3.5 Increasing Access and Equality for all Children**

3.5.1 There is a continuing need to create equity and access for all children and service providers across statutory, voluntary and private sector provision. There also needs to be a commitment to ensuring that children with special education need(s) receive the required support regardless of their setting. The document highlights the fact that the Department of Education is working on the expansion of Sure Start services, and though this is a positive first step, it does also state that this expansion will be in the only most disadvantaged wards in Northern Ireland. Notwithstanding this expansion, there is an absence of proposals for services, for those children, for example, between the ages of 0-3 outside Sure Start locations. Sure Start services have been a vital starting point and their existence of paramount importance in

attempting to secure appropriate early years education and care for all the children of Northern Ireland.

3.5.2 However, simply expanding these services by 5% will not wholly address the problem of children in poverty and their need for early years' education. In fact according to Sammons et al (2008), disadvantaged children benefit significantly from good quality pre-school experience where they are with a mixture of children from different social backgrounds. The need thus, for Sure Start to be expanded into less socially deprived areas, allowing children from less financially secure backgrounds to interact with a range of children from different areas, should not be under-represented. Moreover, the WSN is alarmed at the Department's evident failure to meaningfully commit to those children aged between 0-3. This proposed framework needs to be extended in order to see beyond the provision for 3-6 year old children. The WSN would also welcome more information on whether or not there was been a robust evaluation of Sure Start delivery in Northern Ireland in terms of its overall impact and the subsequent outcomes?

3.5.3 Women's centres offer accessible childcare and early learning services in disadvantaged areas and should be given due regard when attempting to expand and develop programmes for children. The Centres have created holistic effective models to continuously meet the needs of women and children. Important to comprehend too, is the reality that without these vital services offered in the centres, women would be unable and unaware of the many educational courses and skills training that are also available. Currently, the centres offer: sessional day-care; Social Service referrals; special needs childcare; after schools childcare; summer scheme childcare and Sure Start childcare. The Department needs, in tandem with the expansion of Sure Start Services, to expand the role of Women's centres in providing critical early learning services and to ensure sustainable funding<sup>2</sup>.

### **3.6 Developing the Education Workforce**

3.6.1 Sammons et al (2008) stated that the quality of provision is likely to be affected by staff qualifications. The comparison of observed quality in playgroups

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<sup>2</sup> See the WCRP report (2010) Childcare Mapping & Research Report

between Northern Ireland and England strongly suggests that better staff training can improve quality of pre-school provision. Presently, in Northern Ireland, there is no standardisation of qualifications. Statutory bodies are required to have qualified teachers and nursery assistants. However, in the voluntary sector, those in receipt of Department of Education funded pre-school places, need only half the staff to hold a relevant qualification. In line with CiNI, the WSN would like to see a commitment by the relevant departments to open up access to degree level qualifications or level 5 NVQ qualifications for early years staff from the voluntary sector, possibly through grant schemes or a bursary system.

3.6.2 The WSN is also concerned with the ratios of staff to children. Currently, the ratio of staff to children is 1:13 for grant aided services and 1:8 in voluntary and private settings. We would recommend a more enhanced adult child ratio, as there is a continuing need to have strong positive adult re-enforcement especially when dealing with children from deprived backgrounds and/or with special needs. We are concerned at the prospect that children of nursery age would be put in a class of 30, as this would negatively impact on their opportunity to learn and their ability to form attachments. Research shows that, when a child has a limited number of positive relationships in their lives or where they have experienced negative primary care-giving experiences, the child is at risk of a range of challenges. 'It is much harder to influence or teach a child who has poor attachment capacity. The teacher or caregiver is unable to use the normal human interactions to 'reward' appropriate and 'punish inappropriate social behaviour. In extreme cases, the child may demonstrate anti-social, aggressive and/ or violent behaviours' (Perry, 2001c).

### **3.7 Improving the Child's Learning Environment**

3.7.1 The 13 women's centres provide education and childcare and acknowledges that there has been real barriers to parental engagement and involvement. Given how difficult it is to engage parents, especially those from disadvantaged areas, it is unclear how the Department intends to work 'in partnership with parents and carers as their child's first and ongoing educators'. There are no clear actions mentioned to indicate how parental engagement will be effectively conducted. Women's centres have engaged parents for years. In fact, the centres provide an environment where women come and want to be involved. This invaluable service has not been

adequately recognised by the Department and could be the necessary key to ensuring a future that involves parental engagement. It behoves the government, in its attempt to avoid duplication of services, to make better use of the vital services that the Women's centres already provide.

3.7.2 The WSN recommends that proper consideration is given to what can be considered as an appropriate length of day for pre-school children. Research indicates that 15 hours a week is adequate for the average person but may not be appropriate for children from disadvantaged backgrounds. In Northern Ireland funded provision only caters for twelve and a half hours and thus, it would need to be increased without delay.

### **3.8 Funding**

3.8.1 The WSN fully endorses CiNI's call for DE to invest adequate funding and re-structure its budget to enable resources to be allowed to specifically target early years development and to ensure maximum return on investment in support of outcomes for children and young people.

### **3.9 Conclusion**

3.9.1 The WSN would like to once again reiterate (see previous early years' response) the importance of young children's participation in attempting to create a strategy of this nature. We remind the Executive of its commitment to Article 12 of the UNCRC and suggest that the participation of children can be very valuable. Interestingly, according to Cunningham et al (1998), children as young as three can express their views and interests about their playgroup experience if a range of appropriate media are used.

3.9.2 We would also suggest that certain phrases such as 'learning services' are of an ambiguous nature and need clarification. Furthermore, we seek more information on the 'outstanding' inspection report in terms of who is responsible for undertaking to do this work.

## Bibliography

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## MEMBERSHIP 2012

	<u>Member Group</u>
1	All Ireland Mother's Union
2	An Munia Tober (Travellers)
3	Antrim & Ballymena Women's Aid
4	Ardmonagh Women's Group
5	Ardoyne Women's Group
6	ATLAS Women's Centre
7	Al Nisa Women's Group
8	Ballybeen Women's Centre
9	Ballymurphy Women's Group
10	Belfast & Lisburn Women's Aid
11	Belvoir Women's Improvement Group
12	Carrickfergus Women's Forum
13	Carew II
14	Causeway Women's Aid
15	Chrysalis Women's Centre
16	Clan Mor Women's Group (Sure Start)
17	Derry Well Woman
18	Derry Women's Centre
19	Falls Women's Centre
20	First Steps Women's Group
21	Footprints Women's Centre
22	Foyle Women's Aid
23	Foyle Women's Information Network
24	Granaghant District Women's Group
25	Greenway Women's Centre
26	Kilcooley Women's Centre
27	Lesbian Advocacy Services Initiative
28	Lesbian Line
29	Lenadoon Women's Group
30	Ligoneil Family Centre
31	Link Women's Group
32	Manor Women's Group
33	Markets Women's Group
34	NI Women's Aid Federation
35	NI Women's European Platform
36	Fermanagh Women's Network
37	Newry & Mourne Women
38	Newtownabbey Women's Group
39	Older Women's Network NI
40	Omagh Women's Aid
41	Rape Crisis Centre
42	Rasharkin Women's Group
43	Shankill Women's Centre
44	Strabane & Lifford Women's Centre
45	Strathfoyle Women's Centre

46	The Learning Lodge
47	Voices Women's Group
48	Waterside Women's Centre
49	Windsor Women's Centre
50	Women Connect Project
51	Women into Politics
52	Women's Information Group
53	Women's News
54	Women's TEC
55	Women 2 Gather
56	Women's Resource & Development Agency
57	WISPA (Women in Sport & Physical Activity)
58	Ardcarn Women's Group
59	OIYIN Women's Group
60	Mossley Women's Institute
61	Mount Vernon Women's Group
62	Coole New Opportunities
63	North Belfast Womens Initiative & Support Project
	<u><a href="#">Associate Members</a></u>
1.	Ballymena Community Forum
2.	CiNI
3.	Community Relations Forum
4.	East Belfast Community Partnership
5.	Employers for Childcare
6.	HIV Centre (Women's Support Group)
7.	Mencap
8.	National Women's Council of Ireland
9.	Playboard
10.	RNIB (Women's Group)
11.	Good Morning Newtownabbey
12.	Monkstown Community Association
13.	WAVE Trauma Centre
14.	WEA
15.	Parents Advice Centre
16.	Templemore Community Action Group
17.	Gingerbread
18.	Larne Community Development Project
19.	Community First Coaching
20.	Changing Faces
21.	Sands NI
22.	Women's Project Ashton Centre
23.	Women on Track
24.	Matt Talbot Women's Group
25.	Ulster People's College
26.	Council for the Homeless NI