



**Response to**

**Department of Education**  
**Consultation on**

**Review of Pre-School Education**  
**in Northern Ireland**

## **Introduction**

Children in Northern Ireland is the regional umbrella body for the voluntary child care sector in Northern Ireland.

To our membership of over 90 organisations CiNI provides representation and support in their work to enhance the lives of children and young people in Northern Ireland. CiNI provides a policy service to enable member organisations to inform the development of policy relevant to children and young people in Northern Ireland.

CiNI welcomes the opportunity to respond to the consultation by the Department of Education on the Review of Pre-School Education in Northern Ireland.

To inform this response CiNI held a roundtable event attended by those member organisations with specific expertise and interest in early year's provision across Northern Ireland. The response has been informed by LifeStart Foundation, Mencap, Save the Children, Inner City East Belfast Sure Start, and Parents Advice Centre.

## **General Comments**

In examining and evaluating current pre-school education provision and looking at the way forward for pre-school education in Northern Ireland CiNI would strongly advocate that as an appropriate benchmark consolidation and further development of the pre-school phase must be grounded on children's rights principles as laid forth in the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child. This would encourage and enable the development of child-centred pre-school education provision. The relevant provisions of the UNCRC are presented below.

## **OFMDFM's Children and Young People's Strategy**

The review is particularly timely given OFMDFM's evolving ten-year Children and Young People's Strategy which will act as Northern Ireland's implementation plan for the UNCRC. The Department of Education, as with all of the Northern Ireland Government Departments, has signed up to the strategy, through the Children's Inter-Departmental Group (IDG), and in so doing has undertaken to put the rights and needs of children and young people at the centre of policy development. The strategy requires cross-departmental, joined-up working which sets the scene for the future development of integrated early years services, bringing together education and child care in a continuum of service provision for young children from birth to five years.

CiNI is disappointed that the Children First Review and this current Review of Pre-School Education have not been taken forward simultaneously. We believe pre-school education fits within a continuum of care and education for children in their early years. We support pre-school education as one element in a range of provision to meet the needs of children and their families. This range and choice of provision is essential recognising the individuality of each child and the different stages and pace of a child's development, where children of similar age are not necessarily at the same developmental stage. We believe that the pre-school sector must be flexible and responsive to the needs of children and that provision must be developed around these needs.

CiNI believes that the formal education sector must recognise, value and accommodate the variety and range of experiences that children will have coming from either home-based settings, nursery schools or units, playgroups, or other alternative forms of provision. There are many good examples of alternative provision in the voluntary sector. Life Start Foundation is one such example, it delivers support to families in their own home and aims to provide children with opportunities to develop emotionally, physically, mentally and socially, so that they can reach their full potential.

## **Parity Concerns**

One of the major concerns regarding pre-school provision in Northern Ireland which recurs consistently throughout the analysis of current provision is the lack of parity between pre-school providers and in particular between the statutory sector and the voluntary/private sectors. CiNI believes that at a minimum this review must address and ensure equality of provision for all young children regardless of the pre-school setting in which they are enrolled. There must be parity in, for example, funding mechanisms; admission age; staff:child ratios; and inspection regimes (the voluntary/private sector is currently subject to two inspection regimes – ETI and the Trusts).

In the context of the current review the relevant provisions of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child are noted below, and are referenced as appropriate throughout the submission.

### **Article 2**

1. "State 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 parents' or legal guardian's race, colour, sex, language, religion, political or other opinion, national, ethnic or social origin, property, disability, birth or other status."

### **Article 3**

1. "In all actions concerning children, whether undertaken by public or private social welfare institutions, courts of law, administrative authorities or legislative bodies, the best interests of a child shall be a primary consideration."

The Committee on the Rights of the Child in its Concluding Observations (2002) on the implementation of the UNCRC by the UK Government noted its concern "that the principle of primary consideration for the best interests of the child is not consistently reflected in legislation and policies affecting children throughout the State party". The development of a Children and Young People's Strategy founded on the principles of the UNCRC will provide an opportunity to address this concern and ensure that the 'best interests' of the child are at the heart all legislative and policy developments.

### **Article 12**

1. "State Parties shall assure to the child who is capable of forming his or her own views the right to express those views freely in all matters affecting the child, the views of the child being given due weight in accordance with the age and maturity of the child."

### **Article 18**

1. "...Parents or, as the case may be, legal guardians, have the primary responsibility for the upbringing and development of the child. The best interests of the child will be their basic concern."
2. For the purpose of guaranteeing and promoting the rights set forth in the present Convention, State Parties shall render appropriate assistance to parents or, as the case may be, legal guardians, in the performance of their child-rearing responsibilities and shall ensure the development of institutions, facilities and services for the care of children."

### **Article 28**

1. "State parties recognise the right of the child to education, and with a view to achieving this right progressively and on the basis of equal opportunity..."

### **Article 29**

1. "State parties agree that the education of the child shall be directed to:  
  
(a) The development of the child's personality, talents and mental and physical abilities to their fullest potential."

- **Full-Time and Part-Time Places**

CiNI is concerned by the suggestion that full-time provision may not be justified based on the reference to research evidence which suggests that 'there is no educational justification for full-time education in nursery schools and units'. CiNI believes that in pre-school education the social justification is an equal, if not more valid, justification for maintaining full-time provision and at such an early stage of the child's development education should be directed toward the development of the child's personality and social skills.

CiNI believes that ultimately decisions on full-time or part-time provision for a child must centre on the form of provision that meets the UNCRC 'best interests' principle, providing parents with a range of options to meet their child's best interests.

Provision, whether full-time or part-time, should be made increasingly flexible, giving parents more ready access at suitable times. This may also help to reduce the numbers of children in each setting, and therefore allow staff to dedicate more time to each individual child.

There is also concern that any move to part-time provision would disadvantage less well off families, as those with greater disposable income would be in a position to purchase additional childcare.

- **Admission Age**

As across all aspects of provision we believe that there must be parity between providers in all sectors, therefore there must be a common age of admission to pre-school education.

However, CiNI believes that a discussion on admission age to pre-school education should be preceded by a review of the starting age of compulsory education in Northern Ireland, as Northern Ireland has the earliest starting age in Europe and a year younger than the starting age in GB. As an interim measure we would suggest setting the admission age at 3 years, and funding places from this age across all sectors.

The provision must be flexible enough to recognise the needs of the individual child, for example one year's pre-school education may be adequate for some children while others with development delays may benefit from a longer period in such provision.

CiNI agrees that nursery schools and units are not suitable environments for children under the age of three. By removing these children from pre-school

settings it is likely that this will free-up space within nursery units and schools. We would suggest that acknowledging the demand for provision for 2-year-olds this space could be used to provide distinct, high quality, age appropriate provision, thereby enabling the creation of the 'extended schools' model of provision in Northern Ireland.

Given that only 90% of parents choose to avail of a year of pre-school provision for their children we believe that each child's individual experience whether home-based, or within alternative playgroup provision, should be recognised, valued and accommodated as they enter compulsory education. Primary schools should take the lead in outreach work to develop appropriate links to pre-school providers and those offering alternative care and education.

### **Admissions Priorities**

CiNI believes that in determining admissions priorities the definition of 'a child from socially disadvantaged circumstances as a child whose parent is in receipt of income support or income-based job-seeker's allowance' is extremely restrictive and serves to exclude certain groups of socially disadvantaged children, for example those whose parents may be disabled.

The DE has stated that it is willing to consider suggestions including imposing a proximity restriction which would help ensure that children are not prevented from taking up places at their local schools or playgroups by other children with either of the two statutory priorities travelling from outside the area. We have real concerns that this would serve to discriminate against certain groups of children, for example Traveller children whose families have a nomadic lifestyle and also, children living in rural communities.

We would advocate that a more appropriate and comprehensive definition of social disadvantage is adopted in line with the Children (NI) Order 1995 definition of children in need which states that:

17. "a child shall be taken to be in need if—

- (a) he is unlikely to achieve or maintain, or to have the opportunity of achieving or maintaining, a reasonable standard of health or development without the provision for him of services by an authority under this Part;
- (b) his health or development is likely to be significantly impaired, or further impaired, without the provision for him of such services; or
- (c) he is disabled,

and "family", in relation to such a child, includes any person who has parental responsibility for the child and any other person with whom he has been living.

Alternatively we would advocate a definition taking into account the nine Section 75 categories.

### **Children with Special Educational Needs**

CiNI is concerned at the limited support given to the voluntary and private sectors for children with special educational needs.

CiNI would advocate that the provision of pre-school education must be underpinned by the UNCRC principle of non-discrimination so that in exercising the right to education a child, or his or her parents', or legal guardian shall not be discriminated against on a the ground of their disability. Furthermore all public authorities including DE and the area ELB's in carrying out their functions, including the delivery of education to children with special educational needs, must promote equality of opportunity across a number of grounds including between those with a disability and those without.

There is a concern that where a classroom assistant is employed to work with a child with special educational needs this support is not always focused exclusively on that child. Therefore, CiNI would advocate training for new and existing staff in all pre-school provision on the full spectrum of disability issues, in this way responsibility for the development of the child is shared and owned by all members of staff and not simply vested in a single individual. CiNI also believes that staff must be trained in early intervention, preventative measures so that children with developmental delays are identified and assisted so that more enduring problems do not occur.

### **Reception Classes and Groups**

CiNI believes that the current system of reception provision disadvantages children. The staggered intake results in children playing catch-up to the curriculum, thereby failing to make appropriate provision for the child's stage of development.

However, where there is no alternative form of provision in a local area we would support retaining reception provision with a number of provisos built in. The provision must be delivered from September to June, the curriculum must address the individual child's age and stage of development and the provision must be maintained as a distinct element, separate from primary school age children.

## **Staff:Child Ratio**

CiNI believes strongly that the current staff:child ratios of 1:13 in the statutory sector (particularly where provision is made for under 3 year olds) and 1:8 in the voluntary and private sectors is wholly inadequate. With this level of supervision there is no allowance for the individuality of the children and no scope to support their stage and pace of development. We would advocate strongly that the staff:child ratio is equalised across all pre-school providers in all sectors to 1:5.

In relation to the possibility of increasing voluntary involvement in pre-school, CiNI also believes this may be useful if carefully managed and supported. Clearly voluntary support would need effective vetting and monitoring systems in line with current legislative provisions for the protection of vulnerable children. Also voluntary support must be valued and supported through personal and skill development programmes. There is a role for grandparents in this area recognising the contribution which they already make to childcare provision.

In relation to the qualifications of staff the core requirement and emphasis must be on the acquisition of recognised early years' qualifications as opposed to a broader teaching qualification.

## **Curriculum Advisory and Support Services (CASS)**

Again we wish to reiterate the need for parity amongst all pre-school providers and would therefore support CASS being extended to cover all pre-school sectors. The support provided must be designed, developed and delivered specifically addressing the identified support needs of the pre-school sector as a whole. There may be a role for NIPPA in working in partnership to deliver support or address the gaps in support provision.

## **Introduction of New Statutory and Voluntary/Private Sector Providers**

CiNI believes that all decisions on new provision must be based on identified need and designed to reflect the catchment area. While we support the priority given to cross-community groups we would urge caution that any such new groups do not have the effect of displacing single identity groups.

The review report contains projections relating to the number of children in pre-school education over the period 2002-2010, it would be useful to look at how these figures break down at a more local level to inform the development of future local provision and ensure that there is not over or under provision of places in local areas.

## **Viability of Voluntary/Private Playgroups**

CiNI has grave reservations regarding the disparity in current funding mechanisms across the sectors and would urge that a common funding mechanism for all pre-school providers is developed and implemented. At present voluntary and private groups are required to meet the additional costs of rent, insurance, specialist provision, which we believe should be acknowledged and reflected through a higher funding rate for voluntary and private playgroups.

We also believe that to protect the viability of playgroups, where a local nursery school or unit has an empty classroom it should consider making this facility available rent-free to a local playgroup, hence allowing them to save on rental costs and fostering in the truest sense 'partnership' between the statutory and voluntary sectors. The playgroup would maintain its own identity as a separate provider but it would promote the community model of an early years centre – Tullycarnet example

## **The Wider Context**

We note the positive strides that have been made in GB integrating care and education and look forward to such concepts being developed in a Northern Ireland context.

We believe that the Government must demonstrate their commitment to the development of pre-school education and wider early years provision by ensuring increased investment in children's services as a whole and putting in place clear and transparent mechanisms to ensure that money for children which comes into the Northern Ireland block grant is distributed to the areas where it was planned for.

Northern Ireland suffers from chronic under-investment in children's services and this is particularly starkly evidenced when we note that expenditure per head of the under-18 population on family and child care services in Northern Ireland is about 25% lower than in England (DHSSPS Developing a Strategy for Children in Need, Aug '03). Children in Northern Ireland would encourage additional investment in early years' provision, including pre-school education, recognising that investment in the early years can serve to prevent longer term problems and may reduce the need for more intrusive or sustained services later in childhood and adolescence.

## **Equality and Rural Proofing**

In relation to the section 75 categories CiNI notes that "the Department considers that only four of them – religion, race, gender and disability – are relevant to pre-school children. CiNI believes that the grounds of 'age' and 'persons with

dependents and persons without' are also directly relevant to young children and must be included when equality proofing future policies.

CiNI would be interested in viewing the preliminary work that indicates that there are no adverse impacts within the current arrangements particularly given the parity concerns that we have raised.