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16 July 2010

Dear John

I refer to Mervyn Storey's letter to the Minister dated 24 June 2010.

Please find enclosed a copy of the Minister's response.

Yours sincerely

JP **JOHN LEONARD**
Departmental Assembly Liaison Officer

FROM THE MINISTER/ÓN AIRE



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14 July 2010

A mervyn a chair

Thank you for your letter dated 24 June in relation to the Early Years (0-6) Strategy.

The Committee suggests that the draft Strategy, which I launched for consultation on Friday 25 June, does not address what the Committee considers are the key issues, and is lacking in terms of an appropriate evidence base. The draft Strategy is a high level strategic document which indicates clearly the direction of travel over the next five years for early years provision in the significant areas raised by the Education and Training Inspectorate (ETI) Chief Inspector and by many within the Early Years sector. Further work will be needed, subsequent to consultation, to take forward the detailed elements of the Strategy, once an agreed Framework is in place.

We have now entered the period of consultation on the draft Strategy, which I have extended to the end November in order to take account of the summer break. The Department of Education (DE) will use the consultation, and the views expressed as part of that process, to consider if and what changes in policy are required. I hope that everyone with an interest in early years will take this opportunity to influence the future direction of early years services and provision, and I encourage the Committee to contribute to that debate.

I have mentioned that the draft Strategy aims to shape the future of early years provision by DE over the next five years. It would be wrong to suggest that the document does not provide a clear examination of major issues, a context for future



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policy development, and a clear indication of the parameters within which the development of early years services will take place. Section 5 of the document sets out clearly the key actions to give effect to the Strategy as follows:

- the development of broad child development milestones to guide all funded provision up to the end of the Foundation Stage in the interests of coherence across provision and progression in development and learning;
- the promotion of a family programme to assist parents in areas of greatest disadvantage to provide support to their children's development;
- an expansion in Sure Start and the Programme for Two Year Olds in areas of greater disadvantage;
- changes to funding of pre-school provision to address the differences between statutory and non-statutory provision;
- the raising over time of qualification levels of staff in the non-statutory pre-school settings and in Sure Start provision;
- access to a programme of professional development for staff in Sure Start and pre-school provision based on the child development milestones and on relevant existing best practice;
- the operation of the revised SEN framework in funded pre-school provision and the building up of staff capacity to identify learning difficulties;
- the further development, as appropriate, of Irish-medium pre-school provision;
- the promotion of a more integrated and area-based approach to the planning, delivery and support of early years provision; and
- the development in conjunction with DHSSPS, of provision for speech and language.

In my view, these points provide a framework for a thorough consideration and debate of the major issues in early years provision, encompassing equity of provision, funding differentials, enhancing quality and addressing qualification levels, the extension of SEN provision and a more considered approach to the integration of services. I also recognise very clearly the resource challenges that these will pose in future years and this is a matter which will need to be considered carefully.

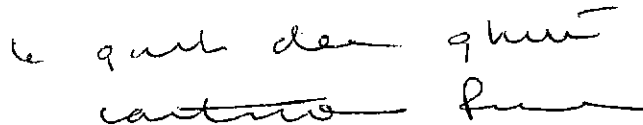
It is important too to look at the draft Strategy in wider terms, focusing not only on the education of the child, but rather the overall *development* of the child, and particularly those from more disadvantaged backgrounds. As such, the draft suggests an enhanced role for Sure Start, with its emphasis on family support as a means of promoting the development of the child in its earliest years, including the Programme for 2 to 3-year-olds, and the further consideration and development of age appropriate provision. An important contribution to these areas will be the evaluation

of existing provision. DE is awaiting the imminent publication of an evaluation of the Programme for Two Year Olds, undertaken by the ETI. Further, DE will shortly procure an external, independent, evaluation of the Sure Start programme. These will provide evidence through the examination of current practice and help us shape future provision.

I am advised that when Members of the Committee considered the draft strategy and took evidence from DE officials, the Evidence Based Paper was not available but that Members will now have received a copy of this underpinning document. I hope that Members have now had a chance to consider the Evidence Based Paper and that they will recognise that the development of the draft Strategy to date has considered a wide base of evidence, including material with an international perspective. This has complemented the expertise within the Inspectorate.

Finally, the importance of early years is increasingly widely recognised. The draft Early Years (0-6) Strategy is an important stepping stone in the development of our system of early years provision that will provide every child with the best possible start in life.

I have enclosed a detailed response to the specific issues raised by the Committee with regard to the draft Early Years (0-6) Strategy.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Caitríona Ruane', written in a cursive style.

CAITRÍONA RUANE MLA

LIST OF MAIN AREAS/CONCERNS RAISED BY THE COMMITTEE FOR EDUCATION ON 9 JUNE 2010 REGARDING THE DRAFT EARLY YEARS STRATEGY.

1. *The complexity of Early Years provision with multiple providers; the potential for overlap in provision; the lack of equity in standards and variability between providers e.g. qualifications; under-provision and overprovision in some areas.*

The Strategy seeks to address these issues:

- a. Early Years services are provided by the Department of Education (DE) through two distinct, and separate, programmes:
 - The Pre-School Education Expansion Programme (PSEEP); and
 - Sure Start

PSEEP

- b. The current levels of funded pre-school provision are a result of the implementation of the Pre-School Education Expansion Programme (PSEEP). This has increased the availability of places for children in their final pre-school year from 45% in 1997 to over 90% this school year.

- c. The PSEEP was designed as a partnership between the statutory and voluntary/private sectors, with new funded pre-school education created both through the building of new nursery schools and units in the statutory nursery sector and the funding of places in existing settings in the voluntary and private sector.

- d. This approach, which was part of an England, Scotland, Wales and the north of Ireland wide initiative, had a significant number of benefits including avoidance of displacement of existing quality provision, exchange of skills and expertise, and was a cost-effective way of significantly increasing the levels of funded pre-school provision in a relatively short time-scale.

- e. Funding differentials between statutory settings and those in the private/voluntary sector have historically reflected a number of factors, such as running costs and overheads, including salary levels which have in turn reflected the level of qualifications required to work in individual settings.

- f. The ETI Chief Inspector's Report for 2006-2008 included the following view: *'The clear disparities in the quality of accommodation and access to resources across the pre-school provision affect adversely the overall quality and effectiveness. Nursery schools are more generously funded. Voluntary/private*

centres receive the lowest allocation per individual child. In those centres where the number of funded places is small, the subsequent lack of resources impinges adversely on the quality of the children's experiences.' The Strategy responds directly to this evaluation.

h. The draft Strategy includes the following key objectives:

- to improve the quality of early years provision thereby promoting for children better learning outcomes by the end of the Foundation Stage especially in language and number; and also in the child's personal and social development, physical and cognitive development, emotional well-being and readiness to learn;
- to improve equity of access to quality early years provision.

i. The draft Strategy states that one of the key issues for DE to address is 'the funding issues between providers in relation to pre-school provision raised in the Chief Inspector's Report and the need to ensure resources are used as effectively as possible to improve services.'

j. In addition, the draft Strategy seeks 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 draft states that DE will 'increase the skills of the workforce in DE funded early years settings by promoting a higher level of qualifications and wider access to professional development' and sets out a number of actions to ensure that this happens

k. In respect of dealing with areas currently experiencing under or over provision, this is an operational issue. The management of pre-school places is a complex process which seeks to achieve the best possible match between places, children and parental preference. While DE retains policy and budgetary responsibility for the Programme, the planning and implementation at local level is the responsibility of the Pre-School Education Advisory Groups (PEAGS) within each Education and Library Board. These groups undertake an annual review of provision at local level taking into account factors such as demographic changes and the relocation/closure of settings, in order to ensure that the allocation of places to voluntary/private sector providers continues to meet the needs of each area.

l. The processing of applications and offering pre-school places in nursery schools, nursery units in primary schools and in those voluntary and private pre-school settings in receipt of funded places, is the responsibility of individual providers in conjunction with the PEAGS. DE officials are liaising with colleagues in the ELBs to review the processes and criteria for application for a funded pre-school place in time for admissions in September 2011.

Sure Start

m. Sure Start aims to work with parents and children from birth to age 4 to support parents as they promote the child's physical, intellectual and social development - particularly those who are disadvantaged - to ensure they have the best start possible and are well prepared for school and later life. Services are provided through a holistic approach, which brings health, education and parenting support services together in a co-ordinated way.

n. Sure Start operates primarily in the 20% most disadvantaged wards in the north of Ireland.

o. The draft Strategy states that 'DE will seek to expand the reach of Sure Start and the Programme for Two Year Olds to improve support for children and families living in areas of highest disadvantage'. This recognises the particular benefits to be gained from a holistic approach to health, education and parenting in providing a child with the best start in life, and particularly for those who may have reduced life chances.

LIST OF MAIN AREAS/CONCERNS RAISED BY THE COMMITTEE FOR EDUCATION ON 9 JUNE 2010 REGARDING THE DRAFT EARLY YEARS STRATEGY.

2. *The absence of an evidence base on the benefits of early years education and assertion that 'there is an income-related gap in school readiness' (paragraph 1.1) without reference to other possible factors related to school readiness, such as the number of books in the home.*

Chapter 3 of the Evidence Based Paper, which supports the draft Early Years (0-6) Strategy sets out the rationale for early years interventions and considers a wide range of international research. A range of studies has found an intrinsic link between better life chances and the provision of high quality early years services, including the Effective Provision of Pre-School Education (EPPE) and EPPNI Study in England, Scotland, Wales and the north of Ireland, and consideration by the Daycare Trust. The Evidence Based Paper recognizes, however, that there is a wide range of influences that can affect a child's life chances, and particularly those from disadvantaged backgrounds, such as:

- Amount of parental involvement
- Quality of adult/child interactions
- Development of good language skills
- Quality and amount of play
- Health and nutrition
- A child's learning environment.

The draft strategy has drawn heavily on the EPPE and EPPNI studies and on recent more international research

LIST OF MAIN AREAS/CONCERNS RAISED BY THE COMMITTEE FOR EDUCATION ON 9 JUNE 2010 REGARDING THE DRAFT EARLY YEARS STRATEGY.

3. *The absence of an evidence base for 'focus more clearly on a continuum of play-based learning and development' (paragraph 2.23) and an assessment/evaluation of the Foundation Stage of the Revised Curriculum.*

a. A key thrust of the strategy is to reinforce a clear line of curricular progression through Sure Start, pre-school provision and Foundation Stage of the Primary School curriculum in order to have a clear base for the early development of literacy and numeracy with clear developmental milestones, a more explicitly joined-up curriculum and effective professional development underpinning the appropriate methodologies. The Foundation Stage of the revised curriculum was already informed by evidence gleaned from the piloting of the Enriched Curriculum which was developed jointly by CCEA and the Belfast Education and Library Board. The pilot was based on the findings of international research on how children learn and what was considered to be good early years practice both in the north of Ireland and across Europe. The emphasis was on learning rather than teaching and in the pilot the teachers were encouraged to be flexible in their approach and to adopt strategies to meet as fully as possible the needs of individuals and groups. Judgement as to the appropriate use of different approaches was to be a matter for the teachers.

b. The principal aspirations and qualities identified may be summarised as follows:

- removal of the early experience of persistent failure for the child. This was seen as a primary goal and the basis for the child's development of appropriate coping skills when confronted with later difficulties in learning;
- the belief that the young child learns best through play, story-related activities and play-like teacher-directed activities;
- postponement of the use of formal reading schemes until the teacher assessed the child to be ready, whilst at the same time concentrating on oral language skills and emergent literacy activities. This was encouraged by a wide and eclectic range of activities;
- postponement of formal recorded arithmetic until the teacher assessed the child to be ready whilst laying the foundations for a strong sense of number through practical work in sorting, matching, counting, and seriation together with frequent opportunities to absorb early mathematical concepts and language in a cross-curricular mode;
- promotion of good motor development at gross and fine levels through appropriate indoor and outdoor activities, including very active physical play;

- encouragement of creativity through activities such as art, music and role play;
- development of pro-social behaviour through promotion of self-regulation and modelling by the teacher;
- an emphasis on encouraging the children to be independent and to take responsibility for their own learning;

c. ETI has carried out ongoing evaluation of the implementation of the overall curriculum since its phased introduction in 2007. To date three reports have been produced by ETI and these have impacted on implementation. In preparation for the Chief Inspector's report, ETI has collated its findings on the quality of provision in Foundation Stage over the last couple of years. While this is still a draft report the findings indicate that the schools in which the Foundation Stage has been effectively established build the children's experiences successfully upon the work of feeder pre-school providers through the establishment of good pastoral and curricular links. School leadership, teachers and classroom assistants understand and support the pedagogy of Foundation Stage approaches. The teachers place an appropriately strong emphasis on active, play-based learning which promotes independence and puts the learning in a meaningful context; they deliver literacy and numeracy effectively through play-based learning and actively involve the children in planning the learning; and they develop the classroom assistants as effective learning assistants. The quality of the teaching is outstanding or good in approximately 50% of the sample.

d. It is acknowledged that the Foundation Stage of the curriculum is better placed to facilitate the transition to primary school from a pre-school experience. It is recognized that play impacts in a positive way in a number of aspects of a child's development including health and well-being, and that play can provide a more age-appropriate method of learning and education, which will in turn help a child to develop at its own pace. The draft Strategy recognises the importance of using appropriate methods of learning, and at a suitable rate of progress, to meet the needs of the individual child. These matters are for the professional judgment of the teacher in the classroom.

LIST OF MAIN AREAS/CONCERNS RAISED BY THE COMMITTEE FOR EDUCATION ON 9 JUNE 2010 REGARDING THE DRAFT EARLY YEARS STRATEGY.

4. Clearly set out, current legislative provisions and an indication of any future legislative proposals, including the reason for an element of non-participation in the Pre-school Education Expansion Programme and the inclusion of two-year-olds in the Programme.

a. An examination of the legislation underpinning early years services is included in the draft Strategy document at Annex i. This relates directly to the Children (NI) Order 1985, and the Education (NI) Order 1998, which is the legislative basis for the Pre-School Education Expansion Programme.

b. There is no legislation specific to Sure Start in the north of Ireland. Article 18(5) of the Children (NI) Order 1995 states that 'the authority' (i.e. Health and Social Care Trust) has a duty to 'facilitate by others, including voluntary organisations' certain services. These services include those provided to 'the family...or any member of his family, if the service is provided with a view to safeguarding or promoting the child's welfare'. Under Article 4 of the HSS Order 1972 DHSSPS is a dispenser of funds to the Board and Trusts for this purpose.

c. The Statutory Rules and Order, 1973, No. 400, sets out the conditions that will apply for the receipt of grant aid by a nursery school, including the minimum age for admission to a nursery school of two years of age.

d. In its 10th Report from the 2009-2010 session the Public Accounts Committee recommended that 'the Department should commission research to more accurately identify which parents are not taking up the opportunity of pre-school education and the reasons for their non-participation. It is particularly important that non-attending children from disadvantaged areas, who are not likely to receive support from other sources, are identified and targeted for intervention through pre-school education.'

e. DE has accepted this recommendation and is currently taking steps to initiate research to help identify those parents not taking up the opportunity of pre-school education for their children and to ascertain the reasons for this. It is intended that the research will identify those children who do not avail of a pre-school experience and allow us to explore this further, to ensure places are available and maximum uptake is achieved in pre-school settings where possible within the constraints of parental choice.

f. DE is aware that there is a significant number of two year old children currently in the statutory nursery system. As indicated above, legislation enables such children to enter the statutory nursery system. At a time of demographic decline this could be allowed. However, with a demographic upturn currently

underway there is now pressure on the number of funded places for children in their immediate school year. As such, DE officials have commenced a review of admissions criteria with ELB colleagues in respect of funded pre-school places, one of the aims of which is to address the issue of underage children in the statutory nursery sector. It is intended that revised arrangements will be in place for the September 2011 intake.

g. DE will examine the necessity for any amendment to existing legislation and change to current policies and operations following an analysis of the public consultation currently underway.

LIST OF MAIN AREAS/CONCERNS RAISED BY THE COMMITTEE FOR EDUCATION ON 9 JUNE 2010 REGARDING THE DRAFT EARLY YEARS STRATEGY.

5. *The focus of the Strategy on structure and the need for more emphasis on pedagogy.*

a. The draft Strategy considers learning in an educational sense in the early years in a broader context, including socialisation, language and communication, physical development and good health. The draft Strategy, therefore, also focuses on the wider concept of child development.

b. Pedagogy is a vitally important factor in the early years provision. The draft Strategy emphasizes that a key priority is the quality of provision and outcomes. What the draft Strategy does is seek to ensure that the appropriate structures, in terms of finance, qualifications and workforce development, the integration of service delivery and partnership approaches by the major stakeholders, can better identify and support appropriate pedagogies as well as involving parents in a meaningful and productive way to ensure the best possible outcomes for children. It is a matter for the professionals to determine the specific pedagogies to be adopted in respect of the curriculum.

c. We have in place Curricular guidance for Pre-school Education and a Foundation Stage of the Curriculum for P1 and P2. We have recognition by the Chief Inspector of the ETI that there is good practice in the majority of funded pre-school settings, be they statutory or in the voluntary/private sector. What we need is to ensure that we achieve more consistency across the breadth of provision and it is this that the draft Strategy seeks to realize.

LIST OF MAIN AREAS/CONCERNS RAISED BY THE COMMITTEE FOR EDUCATION ON 9 JUNE 2010 REGARDING THE DRAFT EARLY YEARS STRATEGY.

6. *The issue of potential change to the school starting age not being addressed (paragraph 3.10) – including the lack of information on the implications of a potential change.*

The draft Strategy acknowledges the flexibility provided by the Foundation Stage of the Curriculum in providing a range of educational approaches to meet the needs of individual children who learn at different speeds and in differing ways. Therefore, while the Department has no direct intention to consider a change to the current school starting age at this time, it will consider the comments made and any issues raised as part of the consultation on the draft Early Years (0-6) Strategy, and consider any implications these might have for the school starting age, in the wider context of child development.

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7. The absence of any costings to implement the draft Strategy.

a. The draft Strategy sets the scene for how early years services should be delivered in the next 5 years. It recognises that meaningful and sustained change will take time and will require resources. However, in recognising the importance of early years in providing every child with the best possible start in life, and the contribution that the Strategy can make to that, the Minister took the view that a budget should be established to take forward the Strategy at the earliest opportunity. As such, £1.5m has been made available in this year.

b. However, the draft Strategy is very clear that there can be no assumption of substantial new resources becoming available. The draft Strategy will ensure that the available resources are applied in a more strategic fashion and that funding is targeted in the most cost effective way possible to address the priorities which have been identified.

c. The Minister launched a public consultation on the draft Strategy on 25 June 2010. It will be important to take on board the views expressed during that exercise before any final decisions are taken. As such, it would be imprudent to suggest a cost for any individual element of the draft Strategy at this time.

d. The Department will be examining the costing implications of the final proposals and will seek funding accordingly, and at the appropriate time, although the speed of implementation of the strategy will be closely related to the level of resources available.

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8. *The absence of any mention of a recommended pedagogy for Irish Medium 0-6 provision.*

a. The draft Strategy recognizes that Irish Medium pre-school is an integral part of the overall early years sector. In considering the position of IM early years provision the draft Strategy takes due cognisance of the Report and recommendations of the Review of Irish Medium Education, including the conclusions reached by the Review in relation to:

- models of immersion;
- the necessity for an Irish Medium pre-school experience; and
- consideration of the issue of voluntary/statutory provision.

b. While the vision, aims, key priorities and objectives of the draft Strategy will apply equally to Irish Medium provision and it will be given full consideration in the outworking and implementation of the Strategy, the Department is not likely to set out a prescribed pedagogical approach.

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9. *The extent to which 'The effective Pre-School Provision in Northern Ireland' (EPPNI) project influenced the draft Strategy.*

- a. The EPPNI (2006) research provides robust evidence of the benefits of the pre-school experience for the social, emotional, physical and cognitive development of all children.
- b. The Evidence based Paper acknowledges EPPNI as one of a range of sources of evidence considered carefully to inform the development of the draft Strategy. EPPNI's longitudinal study of pre-school provision is an important examination of the particular structures that have developed here, and therefore provides vital insight into the strengths and weaknesses of the local system of provision.
- c. However, in preparing the draft Strategy it was important that the Department took a wider view, and considered practice elsewhere in order to benchmark existing provision here, and also to consider if there are elements of best practice in other countries that might enhance provision locally and to the benefit of all children.
- d. There is no doubt, however, that EPPNI contained important messages in relation to the impact of high quality pre-schooling, the importance of a highly trained and motivated workforce and the impact of the home environment and the actions of parents in the social and intellectual development of the child. These messages cannot be ignored, and as such have been writ large throughout the draft Strategy and are vital to its potential success.