

**DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION  
EARLY YEARS STRATEGY**

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## **Foreword**

Early years are vital years in our children's lives. They are unique in terms of children's intellectual, emotional, physical and social development and the formation of children's ability to interact successfully with the world around them, both in early childhood and in later life. They are the springboard for creating confident learners and participative citizens.

The international research on the importance of early years is compelling. Early years matter. I, along with my Executive colleagues, recognise this and that is why early years is now one of the six priority areas for the Ministerial Sub-Committee on Children and Young People. This Strategy outlines the vision and the key actions needed to support young children and their parents and to ensure that their earliest years provide the opportunity for them to play, learn and build the confidence and skills that will help them thrive and develop both before and whenever they start school and move through the foundation stage into the next stages of their education.

This Strategy reflects the drive for cohesion in the policies and services affecting early years so that children and parents get the best deal possible. My department cannot deliver this Strategy on its own and I would like to thank our early years partners and other Government departments for their support in its development to date. Our partners' involvement both across and outside Government will be key in helping us deliver. The Strategy spans a five-year time frame from 2010 to 2015. It aims to set out a clear framework for the policy delivery of early years in the medium term and to be clear in its purpose and accurate in its identification of the key actions that will help us meet our aims.

Consultation on this Strategy is an important opportunity for you to ensure that the issues, challenges and actions contained in this report are fit-for-purpose for the people we must serve, our children, our future.

**Caitríona Ruane**

**Minister of Education**

## **Chapter 1 Introduction**

### **Background**

1.1 It is widely recognised that the early years of a child's life have a powerful influence on the rest of their lives. This is certainly true in relation to education. International evidence suggests, for example, that there is an income-related gap in school readiness by the time formal education begins and, also, that interventions early in life can help to reduce barriers to learning that may, otherwise, reduce children's longer-term chances of success. If what happens in a child's early years is important for education, this also applies in other areas such as health and social care. Governments across the world are working to address these matters. While recognising the wider influences which are important in the early years of a child's life, this Strategy identifies the particular issues facing the Department of Education (DE) in relation to early years and sets the direction of policy that the Department intends to take, working where appropriate with other departments towards common aims.

1.2 For education the early years are primarily an important phase of learning in their own right but also a step towards primary schooling. This Strategy recognises the importance of linking learning and development in the early years more coherently through services including Sure Start, the current pre-school education provision and the Foundation Stage of the Revised Curriculum. The definition of early years covers, therefore, children from birth to the end of Year 2 (age six years). These years, up to age six, represent for a child a transition from a world in which they are dependent on their parent or other key adult to one in which they become more aware of themselves and develop personally, socially, emotionally, physically and intellectually. The needs of the children change as they progress throughout these years and this must be reflected in the provision available.

1.3 The introduction of the Foundation Stage in the primary school, for example, is designed to support children as they move from play-based learning and, their development of early cognitive skills associated with language, number and general concept formation. Linking provision in the very early years with pre-school and Foundation Stage experiences will enable a more coherent approach to be developed for

the youngest children, building on their health and development from birth and ensuring that the building blocks are in place to promote attainment in the core areas of language and number. A successful early years provision should impact positively, in the longer term, on raising standards in literacy and numeracy. Use of language and number are the basis of critical elements of all learning – through language a young child begins to make sense of the world.

1.4 It is also important to set learning in an educational sense in the early years in a much broader context, including socialisation, language and communication, physical development and good health. The Strategy, therefore, also focuses on the wider concept of child development. It aims to ensure that the needs of children lie at its heart so that all of our children have the best possible start in life. This is particularly important for those children who start with reduced life chances. This may be because their families are more at risk, or they live in a disadvantaged area, or in an isolated rural area. It may be because the parents are vulnerable to social isolation and/or socio-economic disadvantage. The Strategy also recognises the needs of children whose parents want them to experience pre-school education through the medium of Irish.

1.5 The role of the parent or primary carer<sup>1</sup> is central to the development of children and is vital in the early years. Parents are a child's first teachers and when parents and early years practitioners work effectively together, the benefits can be multiplied. While the responsibility for their children's development lies with parents, early years services have a supporting role in helping children to grow. The question of how early years services and providers can work together more effectively with parents needs to be addressed to ensure the maximum benefit for the child.

1.6 Between birth and the age of six children develop a measure of physical independence; they can establish relationships; they have a natural sense of curiosity and develop increasing confidence, self-esteem and self-control. They can also develop a range of skills such as concentration, observation and early problem solving. For educational progress in our society it is essential that policy promotes effective

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<sup>1</sup> 'a parent, guardian, a person acting in the place of the parent, such as a grandparent or stepparent with whom the child lives, a person who is legally responsible for the welfare of the child'. (Families Matter: Supporting Families in Northern Ireland, DHSSPS, June 2008.)

development so that, in the long term, all children can achieve according to their potential. Learning begins at the earliest stages and continues during infancy. Numerous research studies confirm that the first years of life are critical for the intellectual and emotional development of an infant. These studies argue that successful learning requires the provision of a safe, secure and stimulating environment for the critical early stages. The nature and quality of care a child receives play a significant role in how he or she develops; appropriate nutrition, nurturing, care and stimulation are all essential elements in promoting the child's fundamental ability and disposition to thrive. The more stimulating and interesting an environment, the stronger are the possibilities for enhanced learning in the future as the child gets to know himself or herself and his or her own capabilities. These early developments can establish patterns for learning and promote the child's fundamental ability and disposition to be a successful learner.

1.7 Further, it is widely understood that from around three years of age onwards, children become more aware of their place in the community. Children's language becomes more complex. They learn to make meaning and to listen and respond to others. They learn to make connections between their experience and their environment. They explore, imitate and become increasingly creative. Language and initial problem solving, reasoning and number skills continue to develop. Learning and playing in small groups can help to foster the development of social skills and the ability to co-operate with others. This period of rapid learning takes place across the cognitive, social, cultural, physical, emotional and spiritual domains of child development. It is important that any lack of or delay in development or other barriers to learning are identified at this early stage so that appropriate interventions can be put in place. The physical surroundings, the emotional context, relationships with others, and immediate needs all affect a child's development. For these reasons, early childhood learning should be designed to provide positive physical, social and psychological environments from the very earliest stages. Environments which are developing the 'whole child' are more likely to be provided through the delivery of integrated services, where there are strong collaborative and communication links established between parents and a network of other partners.

1.8 Nursery schools and teachers have been providing high quality early years experiences for children since the first statutory nursery school opened in Belfast in 1928. Voluntary playgroups were established over the last 40-50 years by parents keen to

ensure that their pre-school age children had opportunities for play and social activities with other children. The Northern Ireland Pre-School Playgroups Association (now known as Early Years – the Organisation for Young Children) was set up in 1965 and has played a key role in strengthening early years developments and pioneering new and innovative practice for children, families and carers. Other voluntary organisations also established playgroups as part of their work to support children and families. A debt of gratitude is owed to the various organisations who have developed excellent services for children. This Strategy recognises the importance of the work that many excellent and committed individuals in a range of organisations are already doing within early years provision. It recognises that these organisations, supported by parents, are key in laying the ground work to enable our children to gain the knowledge, skills and resilience to reach their full potential as valued individuals. It is important that all statutory and voluntary providers seek to ensure that those working with children in their early years both have appropriate skills and qualifications and access to relevant continuing professional development.

## **Development of the Strategy**

1.9 DE formed an Inter-Departmental Project Board in 2007, comprising of representatives from all government departments with an interest in early years - the Department for Health, Social Services and Public Safety (DHSSPS), Department for Employment and Learning (DEL), Office of the First Minister and Deputy First Minister (OFMDFM), Department for Social Development and Department of Agriculture and Rural Development - to take forward work on a Strategy. In addition, a Regional Reference Group (RRG) assisted in obtaining stakeholder advice and guidance. The RRG was supported by four thematic groups to input on the delivery, policy and practice of early years and to ensure a partnership and participatory approach to the development of the policy area. The thematic groups (which drew on the experience of a large number of practitioners from across the various sectors) concentrated on equality issues, workforce reform, delivery arrangements and good practice/quality indicators. This work included the gathering of relevant evidence. DE also employed the Early Years Organisation to conduct and collate the responses from a small-scale survey of children, parents and staff from six playgroups to seek their views on what they feel is important to them in the context of early years. Playgroups from both rural and urban areas were represented, as were children from minority ethnic communities and children with additional/special

needs. The results from this small-scale survey along with other research findings are summarised in the evidence-based paper which is available separately at: [www.deni.gov.uk](http://www.deni.gov.uk)

1.10 The future developments in early years are set within the context of structural changes arising from the Review of Public Administration (RPA), aimed at achieving more co-ordinated public services. The new structures will be designed to reflect on the importance of building effective partnerships to ensure a consistent and collaborative approach to the challenges ahead. The purpose of public service change is to:-

- . develop better quality services;
- . provide more integrated services;
- . ensure better value for the public purse; and
- . release resources to front-line services.

Strengthening partnerships at all levels will help children and families to be at the centre of policy agendas. There are already good examples of effective partnership working on which to build. The new Education and Skills Authority (ESA) will have the responsibility to work with the other key parties, especially in health and social care, to develop this approach.

1.11 It is intended that the implementation of this Early Years Strategy will build upon existing 'best practice' and the working relationships and partnerships between Departments, authorities, agencies, service-providers and service-users. This Strategy, complemented by the evidence paper, seeks to:

- . define a framework for the policy direction of DE within the wider approach of the Executive to children's policy; and
- . set out key objectives and strategic actions for future development and improvement.

Following a period of consultation an implementation plan will be developed, providing specific details on the resources available and the priority actions for the first phase of implementation; this plan will address how to take forward any legislative actions. The Strategy sets out to ensure better educational and wider outcomes for children by improving the quality and integration of services to the youngest children and their families from 2010 to 2015. Achieving this will require continuing commitment and collaboration across a number of Government departments and those sectors providing related services. The Executive respects parents as the primary educators and carers of children and the implementation of the Early Years Strategy will promote and require close engagement and partnership with families.

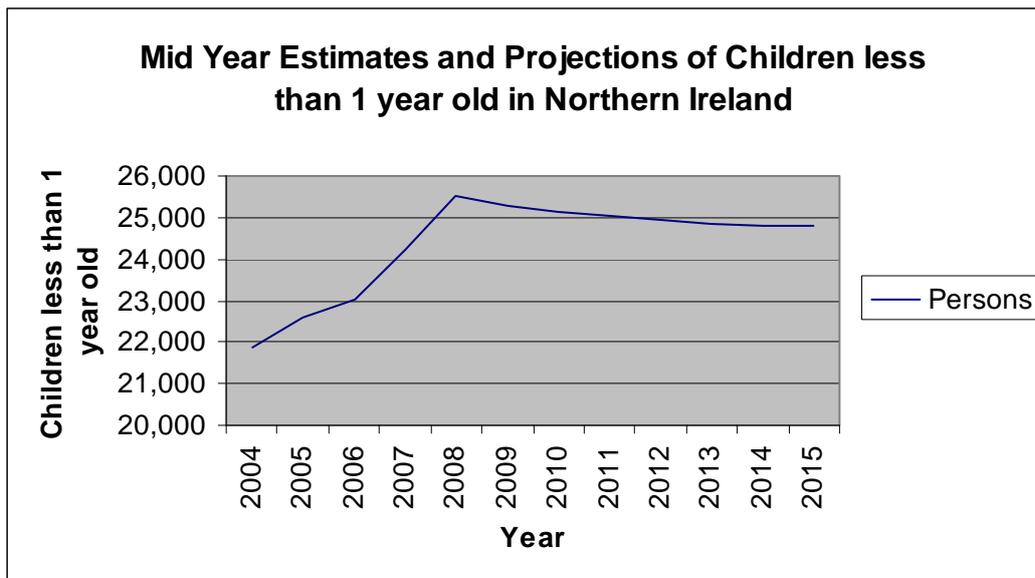
## **Chapter 2      Current Position - context and policy**

### **Wider context**

2.1      Early childhood services have experienced an increase in policy attention across the world since the ratification of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) in 1991, and, particularly, in the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) countries. Policy makers have recognised that equitable access to high quality provision and services can support educational and social development, the better functioning of families and the strengthening of the foundations for lifelong learning. Policy changes across Europe and elsewhere seek to provide services built around the needs of the children, along with those of their families, rather than around professional boundaries. It is clear that countries differ in the rationale and the policy objectives they set for children and families and in the services they provide. Their objectives can be driven by economic, social, educational agendas or by a combination of these. Due to the diverse nature of funding for early years in our system, policy objectives for early years services can also meet a range of different objectives and department priorities, through several different funding streams. More collaborative working is likely to ensure better outcomes for children and society and more value for the public purse.

2.2      The challenges for the future are to place the development and well-being of children at the centre of the Executive's policies, by implementing the recommendations of the UNCRC and the OECD Reports "Starting Strong I: Early Childhood Education and Care, 2002" and "Starting Strong II: Early Childhood Education and Care, 2006". Also relevant is the World Health Organisation commission on social determinants report which indicates that early child development has a determining influence on subsequent life chances.

### **North of Ireland current position**



Population projections from (and including) 2009 onwards. NISRA mid-year estimates for the year's 2004-2008, on the same basis as the projections, i.e., in relation to date and allowing for migration.

2.3 The rising birth rate in recent years means that there is a projected rise in the estimated number of young children requiring services over the next few years. Statistical projections indicate that the number of three year olds is likely to rise from 23,221 in 2008 to 25,425 in 2012. All children (through their parents) benefit from services provided by DHSSPS, the Health and Social Care Board and the Public Health Agency. In terms of DE some 34,000 children aged 0-4, in particularly disadvantaged areas, are involved in the Sure Start Programme. Coverage of the Pre-School Education Expansion Programme (PSEEP) is estimated at over 21,000 in 2009/10 (indicating provision of 94%). This figure of places will need to increase to keep pace with the demographic changes in the next few years. The figures for the 2008/09 year for primary school Years 1 and 2 are as follows:

- . Year 1                    22,053
- . Year 2                    21,558

North of Ireland context

2.4 Children and young people are a high priority for the Executive and Assembly, with the political parties committed to working together in the best interests of children. The Executive's Programme for Government 2008-11 contains a number of specific PSA targets. From a DE perspective, PSA 10 is relevant. This PSA encourages all our children to realise their potential by improving access to formal and non-formal education and provision tailored to the needs of disadvantaged children and young people. PSA 19 seeks to raise standards in our schools by educating and developing our young people to the highest possible standards to deliver improvement outcomes for all our young people, including measureable reductions in the gap of educational outcomes between highest and lowest attainers. Early Years has a key role in contributing to these targets. The Strategy also takes account of PSA targets "to ensure that children are cared for, live in safety, are protected from abuse, receive the support they need to achieve their full potential, become more independent and grow into well adjusted adults, taking their place in the community." Both the Children and Young People's Strategy and the development of an Early Years Strategy will be relevant in relation to this PSA target.

2.5 The two Junior Ministers within OFMDFM oversee the implementation of the cross-departmental ten year Children and Young People's Strategy 2006-2016 "Our Children and Young People – Our Pledge", and chair the Ministerial Sub-Committee on Children and Young People supported by a Children and Young People's Unit. DE and DHSSPS regularly meet to discuss shared issues. In June 2008, the Ministerial Sub-Committee highlighted the development of a comprehensive Early Years Strategy as one of its key priorities, noting it would focus on developing 'a comprehensive early years strategy that focuses on the development and well-being of each child, including affordable access to high quality early years provision for families living in areas of disadvantage and poverty in urban and rural areas'.

2.6 This DE Strategy is a significant contribution to that endeavour and takes into account relevant policy developments such as the existing Children's and Young People's Strategy 2006-16 (OFMDFM) and Families Matter: Supporting Families (2009) (DHSSPS). Also relevant is the Investing for Health Strategy which is currently being reviewed by DHSSPS. This Strategy has also been developed with regard to the principles and articles of the UNCRC and a compliance assessment has been carried out on relevant articles. It is based on the view that children's best interests should be the

starting point for the planning and delivery of services with families being consulted and involved in the planning of comprehensive services.

2.7 Policy responsibility for early years (0-4), including Sure Start transferred from DHSSPS to DE from November 2006. This complemented the Department's existing responsibility for the Pre-School Expansion Programme and for nursery schools and nursery unit provision. The transfer of responsibility signalled the intention to promote a more integrated approach to policy and service delivery for children.

### **Policy Framework**

2.8 This Early Years Strategy is, therefore, able to build upon good foundations. There are already a number of important policy interventions in place, including the "Our Children and Young People – Our Pledge – A Ten Year Strategy" which sets six high level outcomes, focusing on the extent to which children and young people are:

- . healthy;
- . enjoying, learning and achieving;
- . living in safety and with stability;
- . experiencing economic and environmental well-being;
- . contributing positively to community and society; and
- . living in a society which respects their rights.

The vision of the ten year strategy is one where all our children and young people will thrive and look forward with confidence to the future, with the aim of ensuring that, by 2016 all children and young people are supported to fulfill their potential.

2.9 The Early Years 0-6 Strategy will complement the work of DHSSPS based on the Children (NI) Order 1995. This sets out the regulations for day care and supervised

activities outside school hours and during school holidays for children in need who attend school. More detail about the legislation can be found in Annex 1. In relation to inspection, each Health and Social Care Trust (HSCT) must carry out registration and inspections of registered providers. The Education and Training Inspectorate (ETI) also has a duty to inspect pre-school provision under the PSEEP. As the main professional advisory body to DE, its role will be to inspect the quality of early education in all pre-school settings (including the Two Year Old Programme) and across the full range of statutory provision and to advise DE on the implementation and adequacy of its policies and provision.

2.10 ‘Children First: The Northern Ireland Childcare Strategy’ 1999, is the current basis of childcare policy. It has the aim of ensuring high-quality, affordable childcare for children aged up to 14 in every local community. This was a shared policy statement between three departments: DHSSPS, DEL and DE. The Inter-Departmental Group on Early Years (IDGEY) had been created in 1995 to ensure appropriate structures were in place to co-ordinate work across departments to deliver a coherent and comprehensive childcare strategy. The IDGEY made a decision in late 2003 to review the Children First Policy. A review was undertaken and a Report was published in August 2005. Policy responsibility for childcare remained divided between various departments. This is now the subject of a separate piece of work under the auspices of the Ministerial Sub-Committee on Children and Young People.

2.11 While it is important that DE and DHSSPS, in particular, work closely to ensure a co-ordinated approach, DE has a key focus on preparing children for learning and securing the support of parents in their vital role of nurturing their children and working with staff in the pre-school and primary settings. DE carries policy responsibility for the Sure Start Programme and works closely with DHSSPS to sustain and develop the provision. Sure Start is targeted at the 20 per cent most disadvantaged wards in Northern Ireland. It is designed to ensure that in those areas children, up to the age of four, get a good start in life and that their parents are supported. There are, currently, 32 Sure Start partnerships providing services to approximately 34,000 children and their families. A key element of Sure Start is better co-ordination between services and, therefore, it involves a multi-agency approach. It brings together health, education and parenting support

services. There are core elements that must feature in any partnership provision which include:

- . outreach and home visiting;
- . family support including parenting information;
- . play, learning and childcare provision for children; and
- . primary and community healthcare and advice.

2.12 In recognition of research findings that pre-school children from disadvantaged backgrounds could benefit from more than one year of quality educational provision, DE commissioned the development of a Programme for Two Year Olds, which was introduced as a pilot within Sure Start from September 2007. This provided a focus on the 20% most disadvantaged areas. The Education (NI) Order 1998 defines pre-school education as education provided for a child, whether at a school or any other premises, at any time after he or she has attained the age of two years. The Programme for Two Year Olds is now fully integrated and involves around 1,100 children. It focuses on age-appropriate play in small group settings to enhance the child's social and emotional personal, physical and cognitive development and to build up his or her language skills. Parental involvement is an integral part of the Programme since, at this age, the parents are the primary educators. Parents are encouraged to take an active part in the Programme in various ways, to ensure that learning is continued in the home. The Programme also provides an opportunity for early recognition of any delayed developmental milestones and appropriate interventions. An evaluation of the Programme by ETI is nearing completion.

2.13 The PSEEP was launched in 1998 and was designed to provide one year of high quality funded pre-school education for every child whose parents wished to avail of it. It provides a good foundation for future learning. In our system children who have attained the age of four on or before 1 July will commence primary school at the beginning of the September following. In 2008/09 there were some 20,600 children involved in the PSEEP, of whom 14,000 were in nursery provision (including nursery schools and

nursery classes in primary schools) and some 6,600 in voluntary and private pre-school centres. The overall level of provision was estimated as 93 per cent of the cohort.

2.14 There are differences between statutory and non-statutory provision in terms of access to full-time places, provision for special educational needs (SEN), funding, staff to child ratios and the qualifications expected of the staff. All pre-school settings follow the broadly based “Curricular Guidance for Pre-School Education” developed by Council for the Curriculum Examinations & Assessment (CCEA). The latest Chief Inspector’s Report 2006-2008<sup>2</sup> reported some variation in the effectiveness of different types of provision. The highest and most consistent quality was in nursery schools where over half of the provision is judged to be outstanding; in the voluntary/private centres it is just over one-third. The Chief Inspector recommends that DE should review the reasons for the differences. These include issues around staff qualifications and training, leadership capacity and the level of external professional support as well as issues of pay and status. There are also disparities in the quality of accommodation and access to resources across the pre-school sector, which can impact adversely on the overall quality and effectiveness. There are funding differences among nursery schools, nursery units and voluntary/private pre-school centres. Where the number of funded places is small the subsequent lack of resources affects adversely on the quality of the provision.

2.15 The PSEEP was aimed at providing a free, quality pre-school place for children in their pre-school year and was, therefore, focused on three year olds. However, as highlighted in the recent Northern Ireland Audit Office (NIAO) Report<sup>3</sup> a number of children who were not in their immediate pre-school year received a place in the Programme. While this is permitted by legislation, the presence of two year olds in statutory nursery provision appropriate for two to three year olds is, therefore an issue that has to be considered further. The Department is currently of the view that, over time, provision for two year olds should be a targeted service aimed at children from areas of most significant disadvantage.

2.16 Childcare Partnerships were established with a range of responsibilities in each Health and Social Care Board area in 1999 as a result of the Children First policy, to

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<sup>2</sup> The Chief Inspector’s Report 2006-2008- The Education and Training Inspectorate (2009).

<sup>3</sup> The Pre-School Expansion Programme – Report of the Comptroller and Auditor General 19 June 2009).

support services for children. Since 2001 the Partnerships have played a key role in the development and support of the Sure Start Programme while retaining many other roles and responsibilities. Each Education and Library Board (ELB) also has a Pre-School Education Advisory Group (PEAG) which co-ordinates the allocation of the PSEEP places to statutory, voluntary and private sector providers. The PEAGs also offer a mechanism to address issues around pre-school education provision in the area, group sizes and capacity and to ensure that outcomes of ETI inspections are taken fully into account in the planning process.

2.17 Early intervention encompasses a wide range of issues and means identifying and addressing specific needs in a timely way. This is a key element in the recent DE Review of Special Education Needs and Inclusion. Such needs can constrain a child's ability to grow and learn, to develop and fulfill his or her potential, and vitally, to enjoy the very best start in life that every child deserves. Delays in dealing with difficulties may cause unnecessary stress and a worsening of the problem. Best practice in the early years suggests the need to identify children early, who need more help; to organise interventions using external support and particularly health visitors where appropriate; to provide effective pastoral care systems; and to develop strong links with parents and the wider community to support and underpin the work of the provider. The interventions may include therapies such as speech and language, behaviour management, educational programmes and parenting programmes. The more integrated the approach can be, the more effective it is likely to be. The intervention should occur during the critical early phase of the difficulty and may be remedial or preventative.

2.18 Early interventions may be more costly on a short-term basis, but can have long-term cost benefits, not only in financial terms but also in relation to outcomes for children. Effective early intervention requires an integrated approach to service delivery and greater engagement with families and communities. While there has been some progress in this area there still remains too much variability, across the sector, in the availability of expertise, funding and resources and in the effectiveness of professional collaboration. For children within pre-school education, inspectorate evidence suggests that getting appropriate diagnosis at an early stage still remains too difficult in some cases and the support available for young children identified with SEN and their parents is not consistent.

2.19 The current Review of Special Educational Needs and Inclusion policy aims to develop a comprehensive, early intervention and inclusion approach, which recognises and delivers timely support for learning to those children who need it, from entry to pre-school settings. DE's draft Literacy and Numeracy Strategy also acknowledges the importance of early intervention. Good quality early years practice encourages early learners to acquire the knowledge, skills and understanding that enable them to become more competent and confident learners. Similarly, the Foundation Stage recognises that children's learning can be enhanced through activities such as learning through play and this can assist the transition into more formal learning. The Pre-School Curricular Guidance and the Foundation stage of the primary curriculum are designed to ensure a good basis is laid for the development of language and number skills.

2.20 The Review of Irish-Medium Education report noted the valuable role of pre-school in relation to linguistic outcomes. Practitioners in Irish-medium education emphasised strongly the benefits that they believe accrue from a high-quality pre-school Irish-medium experience. Issues around funding, settings and the need for research into educational outcomes were identified in the IME Review as requiring to be addressed and will be taken forward through this Strategy.

### **Priorities for Action**

2.21 There is, therefore, a legislative and policy base and much good provision on which the Early Years Strategy can build and DE will consider further the legislative implications of policy changes. In the development of this Strategy, DE worked with ETI, other departments and stakeholders to identify the key priorities for this important phase of a child's life from the perspective of child development. It also considered the research evidence, the evidence from inspection and the report of the NIAO on pre-school education. The evidence points to the importance of this phase as the basis for successful learning. As well as providing broad development for children through the early years, early years provision will offer experiences that will serve children well when they start their formal learning and will provide the building blocks that will allow them to achieve success in language and number.

2.22 Four key priority areas emerge from this consideration. These are:-

- (i) **Quality of provision and outcomes.** This is vital in relation to all early years programmes. The approaches and standards need to be clear and early years providers need to ensure that these are understood and achieved. DE should promote a more integrated approach to early years provision in order to better manage transitions between the different stages, to assist children's progress in learning and development and to help, in particular, those children who experience disadvantage.
- (ii) **The role of parents and carers is vital.** Parents and carers need to be made more aware of the importance of their role in the early education of their child and parental involvement with early years providers and schools should be further encouraged. Children will achieve more if parents and carers, early years providers and schools work closely together.
- (iii) **Equity of access.** It is vital that issues of access to quality provision are addressed and that barriers to children's learning are better identified and addressed. The role of the workforce is key in ensuring quality provision and steps need to be taken to ensure that those working in the early years sectors have appropriately high qualifications and access to support. There is too much variability across the sectors in the availability of expertise and resources for children with SEN and this must change. Good quality early years Irish medium education will be further developed, where appropriate, to help to make it available to those who wish to access it.
- (iv) **The importance of more effective linkages in the delivery of services.** There are a number of key partners involved in the delivery of services - some of which are newly created as part of RPA - and it will be important that appropriate management and information systems are developed and also that these organisations work together effectively from the outset.

2.23 To take forward these priorities and, in particular, to achieve DE's aim of ensuring that all learners fulfil their potential will require greater linkages to be made, in particular,

throughout the education sector and between ESA and the new Health structures. The educational and wider benefits will be apparent in better outcomes. There is much evidence to suggest that ability gaps open up early, before formal schooling begins, and that the highest returns can be achieved from early interventions that set the stage for, and create the abilities needed for, success in later life. Those involved in pre-school provision and in delivering the Foundation Stage of the primary curriculum should focus more clearly on a continuum of play-based learning and development, leading into more formal learning at an appropriate stage ensuring also that key information moves with the child across transitions. It is vitally important that the building blocks for language development and number are established in the early years and that there is an early identification and addressing of any developmental difficulties.

### Chapter 3 Vision, Aims and Objectives of the Strategy

3.1 It is the purpose of the Strategy to define a framework for DE policy and to set out the key objectives and actions for future development and improvement. As indicated, evidence from research such as the Effective Pre-School Provision in Ireland project 1998-2004 Study, from the Chief Inspector's Report, and from the work of the various departments, and from the consideration of the Regional Reference groups suggests the key priorities of pursuing a sharper focus on quality and outcomes, and on greater coherence in terms of progression in child development; a highly qualified work force more engagement with families and communities especially in areas of disadvantage; tackling issues of equity of access to quality; and greater emphasis on integration in service delivery. These priorities accord with international models of early years policy and practice which focus upon:

- . the needs of the child;
- . strong parental and community involvement;
- . access to high quality provision for all;
- . a highly qualified work force;
- . effective collaborative structures with data-sharing information systems; and
- . more collaborative and integrated service delivery built on existing best practice.

3.2 The vision which lies at the heart of the Strategy is:-

- . *to enable every child to develop to their full potential by giving each one the best start possible.*

3.3. Based on existing policy and practice and on the research, the aims of the DE Strategy are to:

- . *value and respect the early years of a child's life, while also laying the foundations of and removing barriers to learning so that each child can develop as a successful learner; and*
- . *achieve positive outcomes for children by supporting their development through high quality, child-centred and family-focused services, ensuring greater equality of access.*

These aims will require all those involved - parents, government, the community, statutory, voluntary and private sectors - to work together to provide quality learning environments and services for children focused on achieving the best possible outcomes for each individual child.

3.4 In support of the aims and to ensure effective policy making and implementation four key objectives have been defined. The rationale and background to these objectives is set out in Annex 2. The key objectives are:-

- . 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 recognise and respect the role of parents of young children and to raise the level of engagement by DE (and its partners) with families and communities;
- . to improve equity of access to quality early years provision; and
- . to encourage greater collaboration among key partners to promote greater integration in service delivery.

These key objectives will form the foundations for delivering more effective early years services from 2010.

3.5. The Strategy has to take a number of factors into account in respect of the actions required to deliver on these key objectives:

- . there can be no assumption, at this point, of substantial new resources becoming available - it may be a case of making better use of existing resources so the Department will need to ensure that all interventions are effective and appropriate;
- . the reorganisation of education and health under RPA offers an opportunity to do things differently and to remove some institutional barriers;
- . the Strategy will have to complement the Minister's policies including literacy and numeracy, SEN and inclusion, newcomer children and the Review of Irish-medium Education;
- . it will have to take into account new and emerging relevant Executive policies - for example, childcare, disability discrimination and play and leisure; and
- . strong partnerships will be central to success e.g. the relationship between DE and DHSSPS in relation to policy; the relationship between ESA and relevant health bodies in terms of delivery; the involvement of parents, communities and others with the statutory agencies.

3.6 There are also certain key issues that will have to be taken into account in the short term:

- . DE will work with DHSSPS to ensure that ESA collaborates with the new HSCTs to maintain and develop existing approaches;
- . DE and ETI will work with ESA to ensure the identification and wide dissemination of the best practice in early years provision;

- . DE will work through ESA to ensure that progression in language development, early literacy and early numeracy skills is fostered across early years provision;
- . DE will seek evaluations of Sure Start and the Sure Start Programme for Two Year Olds to ensure that it can build on the undoubted potential in these two programmes;
- . ETI will continue to build on their joint working with colleagues in the HSCTs to evaluate the provision to ensuring that it is fit for purpose; and
- . DE will play its part in working with OFMDFM in considering the future of childcare policy.

3.7 The Strategy covers the years of a child from birth to age six. Throughout this period parents and families, or other significant adults, are central to the child's well-being and learning. It is their responsibility to provide the child with a safe and loving environment that gives the child opportunities to explore, practise and learn at the child's own pace. From birth to age three it is the responsibility of the various relevant statutory agencies to provide support in a targeted manner. Prior to the beginning of primary education DE provides a universal, (though non-compulsory), opportunity for children to avail of pre-school education which, in best practice, builds on the home experience to provide a stimulating, language-rich, open and nurturing environment. This enables the young child to open up contacts with other adults, to develop his or her social behaviour and, gradually, to extend the child's sense of independence. The individuals working in pre-school education help to develop and broaden children's learning and to make them confident and enthusiastic learners ready to begin the formal phase of education.

3.8 Children then progress to primary school. The first two years of their statutory education is the Foundation Stage and these years are covered by this Strategy. The Foundation Stage aims to build on the earlier learning experiences by providing an appropriate play-based learning programme to develop the children's disposition to learn, to help to introduce them to more formal learning in a way and at a pace that takes account of their age and level of development. This will provide them with the skills they will need to succeed not only in school but in future life. The Foundation Stage endorses

good early years practice where teachers have more flexibility in terms of their practice. This flexibility allows teachers to follow the interests of the children, encouraging them to see links in their learning and to appreciate that the skills they learn in one area can be applied elsewhere.

3.9 In the Foundation Stage of the Revised Curriculum, it is not recommended that a child begins formal learning until teachers believe the child is ready. This recommendation acknowledges research on early years learning and reflects a view that, in our system, children begin formal education at too early an age. This focus on matching learning to a child's readiness is designed to ensure that every child can indeed fulfil his or her full potential. It does not mean that individual children should be held back from formal learning until they are ready - quite the reverse.

3.10 In most European countries children do not start primary education until they are aged six, although they will have had experience of pre-school education. There is no doubt that children benefit and learn from the contact, from activity and play-based learning and other educational activities provided in their early years in both pre-school and primary school settings. The issue of the starting age for the primary school is, however, a very important and a very complex one. This Strategy is designed to make children's experiences, development and learning more coherent in the early years, wherever they take place. It is the intention also, however, to begin a consideration of the implications of any potential change to the school starting age.

## Chapter 4     **Developing the Objectives**

4.1     The previous chapter identified the aims and the objectives of the Strategy. The four key objectives are considered further in this section which sets out a summary of the issues that DE needs to address (with others) along with the actions that will be taken to progress these issues.

***Objective One: To improve the quality of early years provision thereby promoting better learning outcomes for children by the end of the Foundation Stage, especially in language and number; and in the children’s personal and social development, emotional well-being and readiness to learn.***

4.2     What does DE need to address?

- .    an increased focus upon outcomes by the end of the Foundation Stage especially to raise standards in language and number;
- .    closure of the gap between those children who are least school ready and those who are most ready;
- .    provision for those working with children of a common framework for child development across the years 0-6 (taking account of relevant guidance) accompanied by appropriate milestones, the implications for learning and standards and quality indicators against which the provision can be quality assured;
- .    promotion of the early identification of developmental delays, especially in relation to language and other barriers to learning;
- .    greater focus on identified special or additional needs and disadvantage to ensure that relevant provision is targeted to provide help to those children who need it most; and

- . strengthening the links, on an area basis, between early years providers (from birth to six years of age) at points of transition (currently Sure Start (0-4), pre-school (3-4) and Foundation Stage (4-6), to ensure progression in learning and development and the exchange of relevant information.

#### 4.3 What will DE do?

- i. DE will take steps to improve outcomes at the end of Foundation Stage by the following actions:-
  - a. DE will commission ETI to work with the HSCTs, ESA, and others to set out the milestones to be expected in a child's development up to the end of the Foundation Stage and to identify best practice to achieve them. These will focus particularly on physical, personal, social and emotional development, intellectual and language and numeracy development and will promote more effective progression for children;
  - b. DE and DHSSPS will commission ETI, Regulation and Quality Improvement Authority and HSCT to develop a Quality Framework for the registration and evaluation of early years provision. The Framework will comprise a broad outline of child development and the key milestones, the implications of these for quality learning provision along with the DHSSPS Minimum Standards and the ETI quality indicators to guide self-evaluation and regulation and inspection;
  - c. In light of the work set out especially at b. above, DE will require ESA to review the pre-school curriculum and advise DE on how it should be updated to ensure a coherent and complementary approach across the early years;
  - d. DE in collaboration with DHSSPS and HSCTs, will address issues of underperformance or inadequate provision in pre-school settings and in the Foundation stage, identified through inspection, to ensure that the highest standards are achieved and maintained; and

- e. DE will seek to identify an appropriate mechanism to capture progression in child development and learning linked to the milestones developed by ETI.
- ii.** DE will develop a co-ordinated approach to early years provision to ensure smooth transitions with appropriate exchanges of information at the different stages through the following actions:-
- a. DE will commission research and evaluation from ETI and other sources to evaluate the quality and effectiveness of provision and of the transitions into pre-school and primary school; it will focus in particular, on the assessment of the children's development and progression in learning, provision for SEN, the transfer of information and the continuity of the curriculum;
  - b. DE will commission ESA to address, on an area basis, the issues relating to two year olds in nursery provision and to reception classes in primary schools to ensure that provision is age appropriate;
  - c. DE will work with DHSSPS to develop a mechanism (drawing on existing data sources where appropriate) by which key information can be shared more effectively so that relevant agencies can access the most up-to-date information on the child with a view to addressing any identified areas of difficulty; and
  - d. DE will work with DHSSPS to promote the use of the Understanding the Needs of Children in Northern Ireland (UNOCINI) assessment tool across children's services as a comprehensive single means of assessing recording and communicating across agencies to improve the early identification of difficulties and appropriate interventions.

***Objective Two: To recognise and respect the role of parents and carers of young children and to raise the level of engagement by DE (and its partners) with families and communities.***

#### 4.4 What does DE need to address?

- . the quality of communication with parents;
- . the engagement with parents in support of their child's learning and development so that they can fulfil their key role as the first educators of their children and to strengthen the partnership between parents and early years staff;
- . the need to work with parents of children in funded provision to address any barriers to learning their children face, including SEN;
- . the impact of the health, care and learning services provided to parents in disadvantaged areas through Sure Start Programmes; and
- . the incorporation of play-based learning, including access to outdoor play, in early years provision, recognising that play is a vital part of the informal learning in early childhood.

#### 4.5 What will DE do?

- i. DE will promote close and collaborative working between parents and early years providers to assist their vital role in supporting their children's learning by the following actions:-
  - a. DE through ESA will put in place a family programme in funded pre-school provision to increase awareness amongst parents of the child development milestones and to assist them with the early identification of additional or SEN. In this way it is intended that parents will

themselves become involved in the removal of barriers to learning. This programme will take full account of existing good practice;

- b. DE will ensure the effective provision of information and advice to parents on the availability of early years services and will collaborate with DHSSPS in the Families Matter Strategy; and
  - c. DE will consult with parents in order to ensure that their views are incorporated into policy formulation. ESA and other appropriate bodies (including Sure Start) will consult with parents on the development of early childhood services.
- ii. DE will build support for parents in areas of disadvantage by working with partners to support the capacity of parents to assist with their children's learning by the following actions:-
- a. 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;
  - b. DE will work with OFMDFM in the development of the Play and Leisure policy. ESA will provide families with information on their role in encouraging the value of play, including outdoor play, in the development of early learning; and
  - c. DE will promote the importance of regular attendance in early years settings.

***Objective Three: To improve equity and access to early years provision.***

4.6 What does DE need to address?

- a. the funding issues between providers in relation to pre-school provision raised in the Chief Inspector's Report 2006-08 and the need to ensure that resources are used as effectively as possible to improve services;
- b. 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;
- c. the provision of appropriate Irish-medium education as appropriate for those who wish to avail of it;
- d. the developmental Programme for Two Year Olds and their parents in areas of disadvantage, particularly linked to Sure Start;
- e. the delivery of early years provision that is appropriate to age and stage of development and aligns with best practice; and
- f. the identification and dissemination of good practice across early years provision for children with additional or special needs.

#### 4.7 What will DE do?

- i. 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 through the following actions:-
  - a. DE, with DEL, ESA, and other relevant bodies, will work towards raising the minimum level of qualifications for those working in all DE funded early years settings, including Sure Start, to an NVQ level 3; the minimum level of qualification for the leader-in-charge will be raised to NVQ level 4 or above;

- b. ESA will secure or procure an “early years leadership programme” and provide access to it for those currently in leadership in funded pre-school provision;
  - c. ESA, working in conjunction with ETI, will identify and disseminate ‘best practice’ drawing from both statutory and voluntary/private funded early years provision to promote quality across the entire early years workforce; and
  - d. DE will seek to support the non-statutory sector through capacity building to ensure they can benefit fully from the opportunities offered by the SEN policy.
- ii. DE will take steps to address issues of access to early years provision by the following actions:-
- a. DE will consider changes to the funding mechanisms to address the equality issues in pre-school education taking account of resource constraints;
  - b. ESA and the HSCTs will devise a mechanism through the existing partnership structures, to manage the allocation of pre-school places on an area basis and to ensure that provision is age-appropriate;
  - c. Given that early years provision is offered through small units and that some pre-school children still take up reception places in primary school. ESA will introduce an area-based approach to the planning, delivery and support of early years provision to ensure that knowledge, expertise, good practice and resources are shared more widely across the providers and that provision is age appropriate;
  - d. All voluntary and private pre-school providers who are funded through the Pre-School Expansion Programme will be required to work within the revised SEN framework;

- e. ESA will provide access to development and to informed advice and expertise from the full range of pupil support services for staff in funded pre-school settings. This support will be managed through the 'area-based' area approach referred to above;
- f. DE will develop proposals to improve access to Irish-medium pre-school provision;
- g. DE will maintain part-time provision with the statutory pre-school sector; any changes to such provision will be based on criteria linked to access and to disadvantage; and
- h. DE will seek to expand provision for two year olds.

***Objective Four: To encourage greater collaboration among key partners to promote greater integration in service delivery.***

#### 4.8 What does DE need to address?

- . the primary focus of interventions must remain, at all levels, on the child and their needs;
- . better involvement among the key partners particularly education, health and social care, to ensure a more joined-up and integrated approach, especially in relation to early intervention strategies; and
- . the contribution of early years provision to the wider Executive consideration of childcare policy.

#### 4.9 What will DE do?

- i. DE will seek to develop and promote collaborative partnerships both within and outside government to ensure that a coherent view is taken of the needs of the child by the following actions:-

  - a. DE will contribute to the Executive's actions for children in relation to the early years and will work with other departments to embed these in the next Programme for Government, including the development of relevant Public Service Agreement targets;
  - b. DE will require ESA and the Public Health Agency to develop more integrated provision in the delivery of its early years services;
  - c. ESA and the Health and Social Care Board/Public Health Agency will work together on evaluation and sharing of data; and
  - d. DE and DHSSPS will explore the optimum use of existing accommodation to promote greater integration of services.
  
- ii. DE and DHSSPS will work through ESA and the Health and Social Care Board/Public Health Agency to develop the most effective structures for the collaborative regional planning of services and how best to develop more integrated services in early years provision by the following actions:-

  - a. DE will commission ETI to inspect and report on the quality of the learning provision in all early years settings; DE will consult with DHSSPS, on how the HSCT regulatory function should align with the quality improvement role of ETI to ensure the highest possible standards of provision set out in the proposed quality framework;
  - b. DE will collaborate with DHSSPS to improve health and social and educational outcomes for children and their families. DE intends to address issues around speech and language provision and health and social well-being; and

- c. in order to promote issues of healthy eating and nutrition, DE will expand the remit of its current nutrition associates who currently work with ETI in primary schools, to work in pre-school settings.

## **Chapter 5 Conclusion**

5.1 Early childhood services and the primary education system have been developed for different reasons with different aims and philosophies so the aim of this Strategy to achieve greater coherence, continuity and equality is not straightforward. The Strategy embodies a commitment to more equitable provision for children in their pre-school year, their parents and families. It seeks to integrate more coherently early childhood services, pre-school education provision and the Foundation Stage of primary education; this will promote better progression, a more joined-up set of experiences for children, a sharper focus on language and number and a determination to help close the gap for pre-school children with additional or special needs or who suffer from disadvantage for other reasons. It will bring increased rigour to judgments about quality and standards. The Strategy seeks to be holistic and raises issues for a wide range of statutory and other bodies; it recognises the importance of early year's provision for society and for the economy. It seeks to enjoin parents, providers, support bodies and the relevant Departments in addressing the issues of quality, parental engagement, equality and access, and the better integration of services, which are set out as the key priorities.

5.2 The key actions to give effect to the Strategy are:

- . 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;
- . the development in conjunction with DHSSPS, of provision for speech and language; and
- . a new consideration of the raising of the school starting age.

5.3 Some of the key elements required to ensure implementation are:

- i. Ministerial and Executive endorsement to make early years services a priority;
- ii. broad stakeholder involvement and participation to promote public engagement for implementation of the recommendations;
- iii. partnership between departments and providers to make best use of funding and support;
- iv. ensuring early years policies are complementary with other related policies;

- v. detailed action plans to facilitate implementation of the recommendations, identifying division of responsibilities, allocation of resources and the likely time-frame; and
- vi. strategic use of public campaigns to draw attention to early years services and provision of information to parents and carers.

5.4 The provision of quality early childhood services is fundamental to meeting longer-term economic objectives, raising literacy and numeracy attainments, but most importantly, ensuring children have every opportunity to have happy, positive childhoods which will lay the foundation to enable all children to strive to reach their potential at each stage of their lives. This paper sets out the broad Strategy following consultation and Ministerial decision. An implementation plan will be developed to deliver on the agreed recommendations.

**Legislation underpinning the early years services****The Children's Order**

Article 19(1) of Part IV, of the Children (NI) Order 1995 defines 'day-care' as 'any form of care or supervised activity provided for children during the day'. Under Article 19 of the Children Order, a Health and Social Care Trust (Trust) must provide appropriate day care within its area for children in need<sup>4</sup> who are aged five years and under and not yet attending school as well as day care or supervised activities as appropriate outside school hours and during school holidays, for children in need who attend school. Article 19 also provides that the Trust may offer such services to children under the age of five years and to children who attend school but who do not fall within the definition of children in need. In developing services under Article 19 of the Children Order, the Trust must have regard to day care already provided for children within its area by a District Council, an ELB or by other persons. With regard to services not provided by the Trust, the Children Order requires each Trust to register persons providing day care to children under the age of 12 years on premises (other than domestic premises) within its area. The Trust must inspect the premises where the day care is provided at least once a year and carry out other inspection functions as appropriate in respect of the service and the registered provider (Articles 118-130). ETI also has a duty to inspect pre-school provision under the Pre-School Expansion Programme. As the main professional advisory body to DE, its role is to inspect the quality of early education in all pre-school settings and across the full range of statutory provision and to advise DE on the implementation and adequacy of its policies and provision. Under Article 20 of the Children's Order each Trust must review, every three years, its own day care provision and that provided by registered persons in the Trust's area. This review, which must be carried out in conjunction with the relevant ELB and District Council, is to be taken into account by the Health and Social Care Board in its annual Children's Services Planning Process conducted under Article 2A of the Children Order.

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<sup>4</sup> Under Article 17 of the Children Order a child is taken to be in need if (a) 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 a Trust; (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.

## **Pre-School Education Expansion Programme**

The Education (NI) Order 1998 - Part V - Pre-School Education - Chapter 1 - Provision of Pre-School Education is the legislative base for the Pre-School Education Expansion Programme and contains the provisions:-

- . plans for pre-school education;
- . grants in respect of pre-school education; and
- . inspection of pre-school education.

Article 17 requires ELBs, in consultation with other interested parties, to prepare plans for the provision of pre-school education (Pre-School Education Development Plans), which is education provided for children between the age of two years and compulsory school age, for their areas. It empowers the Department to approve the plans.

The basis for the PEAGs, and the plans for which they are responsible, was established in this provision.

Article 18 empowers boards to pay grants to providers of pre-school education, subject to their meeting requirements established by DE. It also empowers boards to determine the arrangements for payment of the grants and to recover grants paid when conditions are not set.

### **Rationale for DE intervention**

1.1 DE's vision is that every learner fulfils his or her full potential<sup>5</sup>. This focus is at the heart of all DE's policies and associated interventions. Research indicates that quality early childhood services are essential in helping parents and families improve children's development and well-being. However, they are also vital in laying the foundations for progress later in life. Opportunities missed at the early years stage can have a major impact on a child's chance in later life.

1.2 Good health and care are vital for children to enjoy their childhood and to have every chance to reach their potential at this important stage in their lives. The health, development and well-being of every child cannot be guaranteed, but the aspiration is for every child to have an enjoyable and safe childhood, free from avoidable causes of poor health and impaired emotional well-being. Failure to invest time and resources may have long-term effects on health and social services, the education system, the justice system, and employment; therefore, it is in the public interest to ensure child development and well-being is high on the agenda for action and investment. The coherent focus on child development and well-being will build on the important work undertaken already by parents, health professionals, Sure Start providers, childminders, nursery and primary schools in agreeing and achieving developmental outcomes.

### **Need for high quality provision**

1.3 There is a range of normal development with some children accomplishing certain tasks or reaching a specific developmental milestone, sooner or later than others. Developmental delays however may lead to speech and language difficulties, communication difficulties, and/or behavioural and learning problems. More action is required to ensure that these delays are identified as early as possible to enable relevant professionals to work together with parents and families to help children thrive.

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<sup>5</sup> Strategic Plan for Education – April 2006 – March 2008.

Interventions need to be regularly monitored and evaluated to ensure they are impacting positively on children's development, especially before compulsory schooling.

2.2 Quality<sup>6</sup> has to be the primary consideration for early childhood services. The Chief Inspector's Report makes clear the quality in existing pre-school provision, particularly in nursery provision. There is a need to enhance the quality of service provision, as poor quality services for young children can have negative effects on their health, development and well-being. Quality should be underpinned by a focus on the child and informed by knowledge about social, emotional, physical and cognitive development. Child development is a continuous process, which takes place in all the environments a child may experience. It is essential, therefore, that there is a common, consistent framework for child development to guide those working with children.

2.3 There is no single model of early childhood provision that can be followed globally, yet much can be learned from the experience of other countries. Good quality provision builds on best practice within a country while drawing on and adapting lessons learnt from others. Quality is constantly evolving and is a continuous process in which we will always need to be engaged. It is not a product and so it is important that research evidence, inspection evidence, data information and stakeholder evaluations are all used to review and reflect on quality provision and practice in order to continue to raise standards and improve quality. It is essential that best practice in the different forms of provision is identified and used as the basis for dissemination and continuing professional development.

2.4 It is particularly important to enhance children's well-being and ensure that progress is not lost at transitional points in their lives. Transition, particularly from home to pre-school and pre-school to school, are important moments for most children. For many it is a positive and motivating experience, but for some it may result in regression and a developing sense of failure. Pre-school providers would benefit from information on a child's development prior to entry and the introduction of the Foundation Stage is designed to ensure a seamless transition for children from home, day care or pre-school

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<sup>6</sup> A large part of the research on quality has been re-produced with the kind permission of the Centre for Early Childhood Development and Education (CECDE) in the Republic of Ireland. The Department of Education would like to express our gratitude to the Centre for allowing us to use the findings to provide information for this section.

into primary school. The learning programmes in pre-school and school should build effectively on previous learning experiences, as in current good practice. If information, advice and previous experience are made available on a continuing basis, children's development may be enhanced.

2.5 Currently two forms of inspection operate across early years services: the ETI has responsibility for quality assuring the educational provision in nursery units and pre-school provision in other settings. The Early Years registration and Inspection teams based in the Trusts inspect the quality of care in playgroups and other settings. The purpose of both registration and inspection is ultimately to protect children; provide reassurance to persons using the services of quality provision; ensure services meet acceptable standards and the people providing such services do so within an agreed framework. ETI and Trust officials are currently working at the better alignment of their roles and practices.

### **Key role of parents**

2.6 For the purposes of the Strategy the definition of parents is:

*'a parent, guardian, a person acting in the place of the parent, such as a grandparent or stepparent with whom the child lives, a person who is legally responsible for the welfare of the child'. (Families Matter: Supporting Families in Northern Ireland, DHSSPS, June 2008.)*

2.7 For all children, the quality of the home learning environment is more important for intellectual and social development than parental occupation, education or income. What parents do is more important than who parents are<sup>7</sup>.

2.8 Parents and families are key to ensuring young children's development and well-being. They have the biggest impact on the child's development and their role and responsibilities should be respected, valued and supported by Government on behalf of society. Historically, maternity and parental leave policies have been developed to enhance the care and well-being of children. Recent developments such as improved

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<sup>7</sup> The Effective Pre-School Provision in Northern Ireland [EPPNI] Project **1998-2004** NISRA 2006 Page ii

maternity leave and pay, unpaid parental leave, paternity leave and pay, and the right to request flexible working have all been important steps to facilitate parents spending more time with their children in their very early lives.

2.9 Families are the foundation upon which society is built and the place where children are nurtured. The bond between children and their parents is the most significant influence on a child's life. The way a child is nurtured in the home influences his/her educational and emotional development. Increasing active parental engagement with children, involvement in play activities and reading to a child from an early age will benefit children's subsequent development and attainment at school. Research has found that family deprivation is a major cause of poor literacy and numeracy standards across the world. Parents are important in guiding and monitoring a child's achievements and progress in school. It is essential, therefore, that efforts are made to make parents more aware of the importance of their role and to promote parental involvement in, and engagement with early years providers and schools. Children will achieve more if parents, early years providers and schools work together.

2.10 There is a need to convey information about the vital role of the home environment to parents and to improve maternal health among pregnant women or those who have already had children. DHSSPS has a leading role to play in this. Sure Start, which involves DE, DHSSPS and the Trusts, is a Programme which can support families in disadvantaged areas through a range of services and activities. Some parents may require information, advice and/or support as they discharge their parenting responsibilities.

2.11 Young children want and need to play. Play is how young children learn and should be valued and respected as a right. A high quality system in which children learn through play will build a firm foundation for more formal learning. One of the most efficient strategies for improving child development is to ensure parents, caregivers and practitioners appreciate the importance of play and the ways in which they can promote it. The quality of indoor and outdoor environments is also important to ensure safe and stimulating play.

## **Equity and access**

2.12 There is much to be proud of in the Early Years Sector and in the provision which exists. However, we need to identify children who experience greater difficulty in learning or progressing than their peers. The child may have personal or social circumstances which are delaying their development or they may have special education needs or a disability. Whatever the reason, it is key that barriers to learning are identified early and appropriate interventions are put in place. Particular consideration needs to be given to ensuring that those children who face particular issues of disadvantage should have the opportunity for additional support if this is needed.

2.13 Sure Start covers the top 20% most disadvantaged wards as denoted by the NISRA multiple deprivation indices. The strategic direction of Sure Start cannot happen in isolation from other DE programmes/policies eg SEN Review. The development and consolidation of Sure Start must happen within this wider context.

2.14 The PSEEP has successfully achieved its aim of providing a pre-school place for every child whose parents wish it. Much has also been done to improve the quality of provision but we need to ensure that it forms part of a range of integrated educational experiences for age 0-6. Work also needs to be undertaken on ensuring quality age-appropriate experiences and on identifying and disseminating effective early interventions. Revising the PSEEP will need to take into consideration recommendations from the SEN and Inclusion Review and the Review of Irish-Medium Education relevant to pre-school educational provision.

2.15 With the overwhelming evidence demonstrating the relationship between a highly skilled workforce and the successful development and enhanced well-being of children during this important time in their lives, countries are now expanding and improving the skills and status of the early years workforce. Currently, the early years sector is characterised by the clear division between pre-school education within nursery schools and units and other provision for under-fours, making the delivery of integrated services for children and families more challenging. There is a considerable mismatch between the level of qualifications that are considered desirable to support positive outcomes for children and the qualifications of a significant proportion of staff currently in post. New roles are emerging and new ways of working are establishing a need for a more

integrated approach within training, qualifications and continuing professional development. Work is currently under way on reforms to the current National Qualifications Framework, with the introduction of the Qualifications and Credit Framework and this work will facilitate a consideration of the issue of appropriate levels of qualification for the workforce in order to set the pattern for future recruitment and for development. Good professional development is important to improve attitudes, knowledge and skills; to impact positively on learning, confidence, attitudes and achievements; to enhance motivation and morale; and is central to improvement. ETI evidence suggests that much needs to be done around initial training of workers in the early years to ensure that standards are as high as possible.

### **Collaborative and integrated service delivery**

2.16 A number of structures were developed to implement aspects of Children First: The Northern Ireland Childcare Strategy. These were the Inter-Departmental Group on Early Years (IDGEY), The Children First Advisory Forum, Childcare Partnerships, and under the PSEEP, PEAGs were also established. These groups were effective in addressing the issues for which they were responsible and contributed significantly to early years services. However at a time of rationalisation and streamlining structures under RPA with the creation of ESA, the Public Health Agency and new health structures, it will be necessary to consider how governance, accountability and support will be provided. Decisions on the appropriate structure will be a responsibility of the Departments and the new education and health administrative authorities.

2.17 An information management system to gather and provide reliable data is vital in implementing effective service provision as the data produced can provide valuable information which will help with the delivery and planning of services and ensure greater accountability.

2.18 Following the implementation of RPA the delivery of services will change significantly. At a regional level, operational functions in respect of DE's early years services will become the responsibility of ESA. To implement DE policies, functional responsibilities in relation to the early years will be part of ESA's remit, working with Health structures and partners. ESA will be responsible for deciding the delivery of

services at local level through its Local Area Teams and will work with its partners and service providers, where areas for improvement have been identified as part of the inspection process.

2.19 At local level a significant volume of services for young children is provided by the private, voluntary and community sectors. ESA will engage with private, voluntary and community partners in the commissioning and delivery of services. ESA, in turn, will wish to engage effectively with agencies, co-operate effectively with its partners, including the voluntary, community and private sectors, promote leadership and human capacity to move the agenda forward, and to provide effective workforce training. Partnership requires a knowledge and understanding of roles and respect and trust of each other. Working in partnership is a crucial part of outcomes-led planning and helps to develop more effective interventions, to facilitate evaluation and on-going support for quality services.

2.20 Since the launch of Children First, PSEEP and Sure Start there has been a growth in services for young children, but this provision needs to develop further. More integrated service delivery around the needs and in the best interests of children will require more effective multi-agency and inter-disciplinary working and should challenge traditional structures, organisational practices and professional boundaries. Collaboration, through partnership working, where plans are formulated by and between agencies for the provision of services, is a vital first step. The new education and health structures can identify high quality, existing provision as potential leading centres for early years services, which may include a contribution to training, mentoring, coaching, sign-posting to other services and/or dissemination of good practice. The new structures can also pursue the development of more integrated services in local areas through a network of services. The plans for new/refurbished buildings need to consider the co-location and integration of services, which can provide more joined-up support, support the development of co-operative working practices, and be more responsive to local needs. By integrating services, parents are more likely to find the help they need in an accessible manner.

## Compliance of Early Years (0-6) Strategy with United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC)

The articles from UNCRC most relevant for the development of Early Childhood Education and Care Services are:		Compliance of Early Years Strategy with UNCRC
<p>(i) Article 3:</p>	<p>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 the child shall be a primary consideration.</p> <p>3.2 State parties undertake to ensure the child such protection as is necessary for his or her well-being, taking into account the rights and duties of his or her parents, legal guardians, or other individuals legally responsible for him or her, and to this end, shall take all appropriate legislative and administrative measures.</p> <p>3.3 States Parties shall ensure that the institutions, services and facilities responsible for the care or protection of children shall conform with the standards established by competent authorities,</p>	<p>Yes: Vision, Aims and Objectives all ensure 'best interests of the child'.</p> <p>Yes: Well-being, and the wider concept of child development, is a theme and Quality Framework will include child protection procedures.</p> <p>Yes: Quality Framework and Registration and Inspection Procedures will set out and ensure conformity with the standards.</p>

<p>(ii) Article 5:</p>	<p>particularly in the areas of safety, health, in the number and suitability of their staff, as well as competent supervision.</p> <p>States Parties shall respect the responsibilities, rights and duties of parents or, where applicable, the members of the extended family or community as provided for by local custom, legal guardians or other persons legally responsible for the child, to provide, in a manner consistent with the evolving capacities of the child, appropriate direction and guidance in the exercise by the child of the rights recognised in the present Convention.</p>	<p>Partially: Objective two recognises the central role that parents have their children’s early development as primary educators and carers, but the section does not include any reference to providing direction and guidance in the exercise of rights by the child.</p>
<p>(iii) Article 6:</p>	<p>6.2 States Parties shall ensure to the maximum extent possible the survival and development of the child.</p>	<p>Yes: The Strategy has at its core child development and well-being. Survival issues relating to services are encapsulated in quality standards of health and safety.</p>
<p>(iv) Article 12:</p>	<p>12.1 States 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.</p>	<p>Partially: A small number of children were asked for views during the initial stages but more information was obtained from parents and service providers on behalf of the children. It is intended to carry out consultation with children during public consultation stage and a children’s version of the document</p>

<p>(v) Article 18:</p>	<p>18.1 States Parties shall use their best efforts to ensure recognition of the principle that both parents have common responsibilities for the upbringing and development of the child. 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.</p> <p>18.2 For the purposes of guaranteeing and promoting the rights set forth in the present Convention, States Parties shall render appropriate assistance to parents and 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.</p> <p>18.3 States Parties shall take all appropriate measures to ensure that children of working parents have the right to benefit from child-care services and facilities for which they are eligible.</p>	<p>designed.</p> <p>Yes: This has been highlighted in objective two, with particular emphasis on ‘parents’ plural, in respect of a single child.</p> <p>Yes: This is central to the vision, aims and objectives of the Strategy.</p> <p>Partially: Objectives two and four cover some of the issues raised in this Article, with a particular emphasis on areas of deprivation.</p>
<p>(vi) Article 19:</p>	<p>19.1 States Parties shall take all appropriate legislative, administrative, social and educational</p>	<p>Yes: Quality Framework and Registration and Inspection Procedures will set out and ensure</p>

	<p>measures to protect the child from all forms of physical or mental violence, injury or abuse, neglect or negligent treatment, maltreatment or exploitation, including sexual abuse, while in the care of parent(s), legal guardian(s) or any other person who has the care of the child.</p> <p>19.2 Such protective measures should, as appropriate, include effective procedures for the establishment of social programmes to provide necessary support for the child and for those who have the care of the child, as well as for other forms of prevention and for identification, reporting, referral, investigation, treatment and follow-up of instances of child maltreatment described heretofore, and, as appropriate, for judicial involvement.</p>	<p>conformity with the standards.</p> <p>Yes: Objective one deals with child development and well-being and includes early identification and early intervention programmes.</p> <p>Objective two deals with support programmes for parents.</p>
(vii) Article 23:	<p>23.1 States Parties recognise that a mentally or physically disabled child should enjoy a full and decent life, in conditions which ensure dignity, promote self-reliance and facilitate the child's active participation in the community.</p>	<p>Partially: Vision, aims and objectives relating to quality, equity and access for all. SEN Review will deal in more detail with Article 23.</p>
(viii) Article 29:	<p>29.1 States parties agree that the education of the child shall be directed to:</p> <p>(a) The development of</p>	<p>Yes: Focus of Early</p>

<p>(ix) Article 31.1</p>	<p>the child's personality, talents and mental and physical abilities to their fullest potential;  (b) The development of respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms, and for the principles enshrined in the Charter of the United Nations;  (c) The development of respect for the child's parents, his or her own cultural identity, language and values, for the national values of the country in which the child is living, the country from which he or she may originate, and for civilizations different from his or her own;  (d) The preparation of the child for responsible life in a free society, in the spirit of understanding, peace, tolerance, equality of sexes, and friendship among all peoples, ethnic, national and religious groups and persons of indigenous origin;  (e) The development of respect for the natural environment.</p> <p>States Parties recognise the right of the child to rest and leisure, to engage in play and recreational activities appropriate to the age of the child and to participate freely in cultural life and the arts.</p>	<p>Years Strategy is on child development and well-being.</p> <p>Partially: The principles on which the Strategy has been developed cover this element of the Convention.</p> <p>Partially: Objective two on recognizing and respecting the role of parents. The Strategy also states its intention to complement policies in other areas, including the development and support for Irish-Medium Education.</p> <p>Partially: While not covered directly within the Strategy, the Curricular Guidance for Pre-School Education, and the Foundation Stage of the NI Curriculum contain elements relating to (d) and (e).</p> <p>Partially: The objectives on child development and well-being highlight the importance of activities appropriate to the child and the importance of play but there is little reference to cultural life and the arts. DE will work with OFMDFM on Play and Leisure Policy.</p>
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