

Northern Ireland Executive outlines childcare strategy ^[1]

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"Every child, parent and family will have access to affordable, integrated, quality childcare."

That is the headline aim in the Northern Ireland Executive's draft childcare strategy.

The target is to deliver the vision by 2025.

The document, put out to consultation this week, sets out a number of aims - including increasing the number of childcare places from 56,000 to 100,000.

One thousand of these places would be focused on flexible childcare - with consideration given to financially supporting childcare centres that open outside normal working hours.

There is also a plan for a training programme for the childcare workforce.

But with the public purse shrinking, is there money available to make all this happen?

The document concedes that while it is "inevitable" that public funding will be needed, "government's ability to support the expansion of the sector is currently constrained".

It says that although childcare is a "priority area", the strategy "will need to use existing resources more efficiently as well as develop new resources".

So there are a number of suggestions along these lines - for example, the executive is keen to encourage schools as good venues for childcare facilities.

It will also look at options for increasing childcare provision in the workplace.

This will begin with the public sector, but they also want to encourage larger private sector employers to consider on-site childcare facilities.

Officials will look at how feasible it would be to provide businesses with some initial assistance with running costs and "small capital works".

Organisations that have been waiting for the childcare strategy have welcomed many aspects of it.

However, given the tight budgets, there is a concern about how many of the aims are realistic.

'Laudable'

Siobhan Fitzpatrick, chief executive of Early Years, which promotes childcare for under-13s, says: "If there isn't support in the childcare strategy for both the demand side and the supply side, we'll be high on aspiration but short on actual deliverable actions."

She says there is a lot that is "laudable" in the document.

But Ms Fitzpatrick suggests that Northern Ireland has a lot of catching up to do.

"Not only is Northern Ireland lagging behind the rest of the UK and Ireland, we're very much lagging behind the rest of Europe," she says.

She says that while parents face difficulties with affordability and accessibility, providers face a range of challenges too.

She says: "It's a labour-intensive industry. Staff costs are high. If you need to provide high quality, you need to pay staff well and invest in their training."

Childminders are keen to point out that while voice is often given to parents who spend the equivalent of a mortgage on childcare, the

childcare industry could never be thought of as well-paid.

Some childminders say that they are reliant on tax credits in order to make ends meet.

Another major concern for them is that they are undercut by unregistered childminders - those who charge money for looking after children, but have not had formal training.

The strategy recognises this is a big problem.

It outlines a plan, through "promotion and persuasion", to get unregistered childminders to become registered.

The executive believes this would create an extra 5,000 childcare places.

Given thousands work in childcare, and many thousands more make use of childcare services, this is an issue that has the potential to win or lose politicians' votes.

'Informal' childcare

Alliance MLA Chris Lyttle is vice-chair of the assembly committee that scrutinises the work of the Office of the First Minister and Deputy First Minister (OFMDFM).

He says that until recently, the record of OFMDFM on childcare has been "abysmal".

But he has welcomed the publication of the strategy, although he says it is "long overdue".

"The correct support mechanisms must be in place so no-one is left disadvantaged," he says.

The junior ministers in OFMDFM say the proposals show the executive is aiming high.

The DUP's Michelle McIlveen says: "We want to create a Northern Ireland where the cost and availability of childcare does not impede the opportunities of today's working parents and provides our children and young people with the best possible care."

Jennifer McCann of Sinn Féin says the proposals "aim to transform childcare".

She describes the issue as "a catalyst for learning and lifelong motivation, promoting equality, inclusion and social mobility".

The consultation runs until 13 November.

Childcare policy and research is evolving all the time, and comparisons are bound to be made with strategies in the rest of the UK and across the world.

One significant way in which Northern Ireland differs from most other places is that there is a high level of what is officially termed "informal" childcare - for example, grandparents taking on childcare duties.

But the draft strategy notes that as retirement age increases, the number of grandparents able to do this will decrease.

That will mean that using nurseries, nannies and childminders will more often become the only option available for parents.

Therefore this policy area is expected to get a gradually greater degree of political attention as the years go on.

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