

Written Ministerial Statement to the Northern Ireland Assembly

Draft Executive Early Learning and Childcare Strategy

17 December 2025

**Paul Givan MLA
Minister of Education**

The Executive's Programme for Government (PfG) 2024-2027 made the delivery of more affordable, accessible, high-quality early learning and childcare a priority. The stated objectives are to support children's development, ease financial pressures on working families and ensure that our childcare sector is stable and sustainable.

I am delighted the Executive has agreed a public consultation can be launched on my proposals to reform early learning and childcare as set out in the draft Early Learning and Childcare (ELC) Strategy.

Development of the ELC Strategy has been informed by extensive stakeholder engagement, primary research, literature review and the recommendations from various independent studies. The cross-departmental ELC Task and Finish Group has been involved throughout, most recently in developing and agreeing the actions, ahead of consideration by the Executive.

DRAFT STRATEGY STRUCTURE AND CONTENT

The strategy is structured around three core themes, which together seek to provide a holistic and balanced approach to improving ELC provision across Northern Ireland.

Themes

Theme 1 - Supporting Children in Their Early Years

This theme focuses on what the strategy will deliver for children. It concentrates on improving ELC experiences through expansion and enhancement of provision, the promotion of high-quality early learning environments and targeted support for those facing disadvantage and those with additional needs.

Theme 2 - Supporting Families with their Children's Learning and Childcare Costs

This theme focuses on what the strategy will do for parents and carers. It seeks to make improvements through increased affordability, availability and accessibility of support and information, minimising financial and administrative burdens and empowering parents to make the best choices for themselves and their family.

Theme 3 - Supporting the Early Years Sector and Workforce

This theme recognises the vital role of the ELC workforce in delivering change. It focuses on improving sustainability, promoting fair pay and professional recognition and building capacity throughout the sector.

Objectives and Actions

Under each theme sits a number of objectives and actions. Recognising that budget is likely to be limited, the actions have been prioritised into three categories: those already underway, those to be progressed next (over the 4 years April 2026 - March 2030), and longer-term initiatives (over the period April 2030 to March 2034). This allows for flexibility and responsiveness in approach, taking into account Executive priorities, available resources and sector readiness.

Actions already underway

However, it is important to recognise that the process of reform has already started. Given the need for urgent action, I secured agreement from Executive colleagues to allocate £80m additional funding in the last two financial years to move ahead with the implementation of several key actions within the strategy in advance of the full plan. These actions are making a tangible difference for thousands of children, families and providers across Northern Ireland.

They include the design and implementation of a bespoke Northern Ireland Childcare Subsidy Scheme (NICSS). Since its launch in September 2024, almost 19,000 families with 25,000 children have benefitted from the scheme which has secured £19 million in savings for working parents. When combined with Tax-Free Childcare, the savings for families is estimated to be £40 million.

We have also commenced the process of moving all pre-school provision to a full-time basis. An additional 2,500 full-time places were created in September past and I announced very recently that approximately 2,200 more full-time places in 102 settings would come on stream from September 2026. The end goal is for all children, regardless of their background or where they live to be able to access 22.5

hours of structured, age-appropriate learning and development in the year before starting school.

In addition to these new initiatives, we have invested significantly more in existing early years programmes, many of which provide targeted support to children facing disadvantage or with additional needs and disabilities. This has helped to ensure that services are inclusive and accessible to all who need them.

Actions We Will Prioritise Next (April 2026 to March 2030)

The success of the actions I have taken over the past 18 months, provides the foundation for future progress. My ambition is to deliver more – more for our children, more for hard-working families and more for the early learning and childcare workforce and sector. This is set out in the draft strategy.

For parents, the aspiration over the longer-term is to reach a point where the childcare costs of working families are subsidised by over 50%, which would compare very favourably with the level of support offered in other jurisdictions. This is an ambitious target but one which I believe would be transformational in terms of its impact on family finances and employment decisions.

There is also a strong focus within the draft strategy on child development. Having looked at the evidence on this and experience from elsewhere, I want to incrementally extend early education for 2–3-year-olds. There are also actions aimed at promoting consistently high-quality provision across all ELC providers (including Irish medium) and proposals to provide additional ELC support for children with special educational needs and disabilities (SEN/D). The strategy contains a plan to strengthen the childcare workforce, both centre-based provision and home-based childminders, creating a more sustainable childcare sector with staff valued and rewarded for the vital work they do.

The extent to which we can do all of these and at what pace, will depend on the level of resources allocated by the Executive. Aside from budget constraints, it will be necessary to sequence expansion in a way which does not destabilise existing

provision and takes into account the capacity of the sector to meet increasing demand. In developing the strategy, I have sought to be ambitious but realistic. I have chosen to include actions based on their potential value and impact rather than perceived affordability. This is what I committed to doing from the outset. The proposed sequencing and scalability provide flexibility that will enable us to respond to the evolving financial context while maintaining a clear focus on what we ultimately want to achieve.

This draft represents an ambitious 10-year plan. It will require significant additional investment with an estimated requirement of £500m to deliver those actions programmed for the next four years (April 2026 to March 2030).

However, I believe the measures proposed have the potential to transform the ELC landscape in Northern Ireland, benefitting children, families, providers and local communities for decades to come.

CONSULTATION PROCESS

The draft strategy is published today for a 14-week public consultation. My department will soon be announcing planned consultation events. I see this as a vital part of the development process, and I am keen to hear from as wide a range of stakeholders as possible. I want to ensure the strategy reflects the real-life priorities of children, parents and providers and that it is a plan which stakeholders can endorse.

When that process is complete, I will bring a final draft strategy, together with a costed delivery plan, for Executive consideration and approval.