



Written Ministerial Statement to the Northern Ireland Assembly
Draft Executive Early Learning and Childcare Strategy – Consultation Analysis

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I published the draft Early Learning and Childcare (ELC) strategy for public consultation on 17 December 2025. The strategy was launched for a 14-week consultation period, which closed on 24 March 2026.

In addition to the consultation survey, an Equality Impact Assessment, Rural Needs Impact Assessment and a Children's Rights Impact Assessment were provided. An Easy Read version of the Strategy was also made available.

This Written Ministerial Statement accompanies the launch of the analysis of the consultation responses to the draft ELC Strategy, published today on the DE website [Consultation on the draft Executive ELC Strategy | Department of Education](#).

Consultation process

The Strategy set out a series of ambitious proposals to transform early learning and childcare for the benefit of children, parents, and the sector as a whole. The consultation process was designed to capture views from a broad range of stakeholders, including parents, children, teachers, early learning and childcare providers, and the wider community.

It sought feedback on the draft strategy's objectives and actions across three key themes: supporting children in their early years; supporting families and carers with children's learning and childcare costs; and supporting the early years sector and its workforce.

At launch, I emphasised that the strategy is both ambitious and deliverable. It includes commitments to:

- Subsidise over 50% of childcare costs for working families by April 2032;
- Provide universal full-time pre-school education for target-aged children, positioning Northern Ireland among leading international models of support;
- Introduce an Early Years Curriculum Framework to promote consistency in content and pedagogy across providers;
- Expand developmental provision to all 2–3-year-olds;
- Stabilise funding for existing early years programmes supporting children facing disadvantage, with expansion aligned to evidenced need;
- Fund targeted initiatives for children with special educational needs and/or disabilities; and
- Develop a clear plan to strengthen and support the childcare workforce.

Consultation Engagement

Engagement with the consultation process was strong, enabling us to capture a wide range of perspectives. Individuals and organisations were invited to respond via an online survey or through separate written submissions. A programme of public consultation events—both online and in person—was delivered to maximise participation, alongside targeted engagement with sector representative organisations.

Collectively, this programme proved invaluable in gathering views from across the sector, including providers, employees, parents, and children. In total, 469 responses were received.

Key Issues Raised

Several key themes emerged. There was strong support for the continued standardisation of the pre-school education programme, the proposed increase to the Northern Ireland Childcare Subsidy Scheme, and the emphasis on supporting children facing disadvantage, including those with special educational needs and disabilities (SEND).

Measures to support the workforce were also positively received. Respondents overwhelmingly agreed that a skilled, valued, and well-supported workforce is fundamental to delivering high-quality early learning and childcare.

Respondents highlighted the need to clarify the role of specific sectors within the strategy, particularly school-age childcare, and to reinforce that the Pre-school Education Programme is an educational provision, distinct from childcare.

Concerns were also raised about the potential for increases in childcare provider fees to offset the benefits of the subsidy scheme for parents.

While the draft themes, objectives, and actions were widely supported, many respondents emphasised the importance of clear implementation plans, including defined timescales. They recognised, however, that the scale and pace of implementation will be shaped by the challenging budget environment and will depend on Executive agreement to allocate the necessary resources, alongside the sector's capacity to deliver the envisaged transformational change.

All responses and feedback received through the consultation will now be carefully considered and assessed. This will inform the refinement of the proposals and the development of the final strategy, which I intend to bring forward to the Executive in autumn 2026.