



Northern Ireland Executive's Draft Early Learning and Childcare Strategy

ANALYSIS OF PUBLIC CONSULTATION RESPONSES - JUNE 2026



Department of
Education

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Introduction

This report provides a summary of the consultation conducted on the draft Executive Early Learning and Childcare (ELC) Strategy (the Strategy). The Strategy included a number of ambitious proposals to transform early learning and childcare for the benefit of children, parents and the early learning and childcare sector. The consultation aimed to gather views from a wide range of stakeholders including parents, children, teachers, early learning and childcare providers and the broader community. The following documents were published as part of the consultation process:

- Draft ELC Strategy
- Easy read version of the draft ELC Strategy
- Draft Equality Impact Assessment
- Draft Rural Needs Impact Assessment
- Draft Children's Rights Impact Assessment

Prior to the formal public consultation process, a comprehensive programme of engagement had already been undertaken with a wide range of key stakeholders to develop the strategy. This included individual events directly with parents and children, sectoral and key stakeholder engagement through the ELC Stakeholder Engagement Forum, and cross-departmental input and oversight through the ELC Task and Finish Group.

The consultation ran for 14 weeks from 17 December 2025 to 24 March 2026. It provided multiple opportunities for individuals and organisations to respond either online through a survey format, or directly, in separate written submissions. Views were also gathered through in-person engagement events. In total, 469 responses were received from organisations and individuals.

A series of public consultation events, both online and in-person, were held to encourage participation in the process. Events were held during the working day and in the evening. Collectively, the engagement programme has proved invaluable in gathering views from across the sector, from providers and employees, and from parents and children. The comprehensive engagement coupled with the awareness raising programme has enabled us to hear a wide range of views and resulted in a significant response rate to the consultation.

This document sets out the views expressed by stakeholders as part of the consultation process. These will inform the development of a revised ELC Strategy document and associated Implementation Plan to be released in autumn 2026. The publication and implementation of a final ELC Strategy is subject to Executive agreement and the necessary budget being made available.

Executive Summary – outcome of the consultation

The consultation on the Early Learning and Childcare (ELC) Strategy attracted a high level of engagement, providing robust evidence from a broad cross-section of stakeholders. A total of 469 responses were received through the online survey and written submissions, with contributions from parents, providers, practitioners, representative bodies, and the wider community. Overall, the findings demonstrate strong support for the strategic themes, objectives and direction of travel set out in the draft Strategy, alongside clear and consistent messages regarding implementation, funding, and workforce capacity.

Overall, respondents strongly support reform but call for immediate, funded and accountable action. The clear message is that without certain fee controls, workforce investment, protection of educational quality and accelerated delivery, the Strategy risks recognising problems without resolving them for today's children, families and providers.

Overall Levels of Support

Across all objectives, there was consistently high agreement, with most proposals receiving support levels between 77% and 86%. The strongest support was evident for measures relating to the workforce (86%), support for children with additional needs (85%), improved access to information (81%), and the expansion of pre-school education (81%). This reflects a broad consensus that the Strategy addresses key system challenges and aligns with stakeholder priorities.

Theme 1: Supporting Children in Their Early Years

There was strong support for expanding and standardising pre-school provision, including the move towards 22.5 hours of funded provision. Respondents recognised the benefits for children's development, school readiness, and family support. However, this support was conditional on maintaining quality, ensuring sufficient workforce capacity, and protecting the sustainability of the mixed economy of provision.

The expansion of targeted early intervention programmes, including Sure Start, Pathway, and Toybox, was widely endorsed as a critical means of improving outcomes for children facing disadvantage. Respondents emphasised the importance of stable, long-term funding, geographical equity, and maintaining a focus on those most in need.

Proposals to expand developmental provision for children aged 2–3 were also strongly supported, particularly in relation to early identification of speech, language, and social development needs. However, respondents highlighted the need for clearer delivery models, stronger integration with health services, and assurance that provision remains developmentally appropriate.

There was also broad support for promoting high-quality provision through a more coherent 0–6 framework. Respondents welcomed the focus on play-based learning, speech and language development, and parental engagement, but stressed that any new framework must reflect the diversity of providers, maintain educational standards, and be supported by adequate resources.

Across Theme 1, several cross-cutting issues emerged, including the need to clearly distinguish between early education and childcare, to strengthen support for children with special educational needs (SEN), and to ensure that sector reforms do not destabilise existing provision.

Theme 2: Supporting Families with Childcare Costs and Learning

Affordability was identified as a critical issue for families, with strong support for the Northern Ireland Childcare Subsidy Scheme (NICSS) and its proposed expansion. Respondents welcomed the potential to reduce financial pressures and support parental employment. However, there were widespread concerns that subsidy benefits could be offset by rising childcare fees, highlighting calls for greater transparency and potential fee regulation.

While supportive of the direction of travel, many respondents felt that affordability measures should be delivered more quickly and at greater scale. Concerns were also raised about complexity, administrative burden, and ensuring that support reaches those most in need.

There was very strong support for improving access to information about childcare. Respondents highlighted the current system as fragmented and difficult to navigate, particularly for parents making decisions about provision, costs, and entitlements. A single, accessible source of information was widely welcomed, although respondents emphasised that improved information must be complemented by wider system improvements and community-based support, particularly for vulnerable families.

Theme 3: Supporting the Sector and Workforce

Support for strengthening the sustainability and capacity of the sector was high, with respondents welcoming funding uplifts, targeted funds, and proposals for business and strategic support. However, many questioned whether current proposals go far enough to address long-standing financial pressures and structural challenges.

Support for improving provision for children with additional needs was particularly strong. Respondents highlighted significant gaps in current provision, including delays in diagnosis, insufficient staffing, and inconsistent support across settings. There was a clear message that inclusion must be properly resourced, with funding aligned to the real cost of delivery and support maintained across transitions.

The strongest level of agreement was for workforce-related measures. Respondents consistently emphasised that a skilled, valued, and adequately supported workforce is fundamental to delivering high-quality provision. Key issues included low pay, limited career progression, and recruitment and retention challenges. While proposals such as a workforce plan, career framework, and Real Living Wage commitment were welcomed, there were strong calls for a fully costed and time-bound workforce strategy.

Summary of responses by theme

Theme 1: Supporting Children in Their Early Years

Objective	Description	Strongly Agree / Agree	Neither Agree nor Disagree	Disagree / Strongly Disagree
1.1	Provide 22.5 hours per week through the pre-school education programme for children in their target pre-school year	81% (330)	9% (36)	10% (42)
1.2	Expand services for children facing disadvantage and children with additional needs	77% (314)	15% (61)	9% (35)
1.3	Extend developmental provision for children aged 2–3 (pre-pre-school year)	78% (317)	12% (47)	10% (41)
1.4	Promote high-quality provision across all early learning and childcare providers	79% (318)	14% (55)	8% (32)

Theme 2: Supporting Families/Carers with Their Children's Learning and Childcare Costs

Objective	Description	Strongly Agree / Agree	Neither Agree nor Disagree	Disagree / Strongly Disagree
2.1	Make childcare more affordable	78% (316)	11% (45)	11% (44)
2.2	Improve the information available on childcare	81% (326)	13% (54)	6% (24)

Objective	Description	Strongly Agree / Agree	Neither Agree nor Disagree	Disagree / Strongly Disagree
3.1	Build the sustainability and capacity of the Early Learning and Childcare sector	79% (317)	14% (54)	7% (29)
3.2	Enhance accessible Early Learning and Childcare for children with additional needs	85% (347)	8% (34)	6% (26)
3.3	Enhance the early years infrastructure through a skilled and valued workforce	86% (342)	10% (40)	5% (18)

Note, percentages may not sum to 100% due to rounding

Cross-Cutting Themes

A number of consistent cross-cutting issues emerged across all consultation responses:

- **Workforce capacity and pay** were identified as the most significant risks to successful implementation.
- **Funding and affordability** were central concerns, with calls for clearer costed plans and sustainable investment.
- **Support for children with SEN and additional needs** was seen as insufficiently developed and requiring urgent expansion.
- **Clarity of roles** between early education and childcare was requested to preserve quality and purpose.
- **Equity of access**, particularly for rural communities, disadvantaged families, and minority groups, was emphasised.
- **Implementation planning**, including timelines, delivery models, and accountability mechanisms, was highlighted as a key gap.

Written Submissions and Impact Assessments

Written responses broadly reinforced the findings of the survey, with strong support for the Strategy's ambition but concerns regarding deliverability. The need for a clearly costed implementation plan, realistic timelines, and strengthened workforce measures was a recurring theme.

Impact assessments received high levels of agreement (86–90%), but respondents cautioned that risks to equality, rural access, and children’s rights must be actively managed in implementation. Particular concerns related to rural childcare availability, inclusion for children with additional needs, and ensuring that reforms do not inadvertently widen existing inequalities.

Conclusion

In summary, the consultation demonstrates strong endorsement of the Strategy’s themes, objectives and priorities. However, respondents have clearly articulated that successful delivery will depend on sufficient funding, a strengthened workforce, detailed implementation planning, and careful management of system-wide impacts.

Recurring Themes



Respondents see real potential to improve outcomes for children, support parental employment and strengthen the economy



The focus on affordability, early intervention and inclusion, expansion of early years programmes and support for the workforce was supported



While the focus on **affordability** was welcomed, this remains a pressing issue, with **fees**, **subsidies** and **delays** raised



Problems for our **workforce** is a critical risk to delivery, including **pay** and **retention**



The need for **distinction between childcare and early years education** was highlighted



A final strategy must **move faster**, be **firmly funded** and **reflect the realities** of families and the workforce

Section 1: Engagement and outreach - methodology and key findings

Methodology - Public events

1.1 The Department of Education (DE) organised five public consultation events to present the draft strategy and gather stakeholder feedback. Three events were held in person, while two took place online. All sessions were scheduled in the evenings to maximise participation from parents and childcare practitioners. Promotion was carried out through social media channels and a range of stakeholder networks.

1.2 The online events, particularly those aimed at childminders and pre-school providers, saw strong engagement, with approximately 80 participants registered. While the in-person events had smaller attendance numbers, they provided valuable opportunities for more in-depth discussions with attendees, including teaching professionals, parents, and other key stakeholders. Professional facilitators supported several of the larger events. Feedback gathered during these sessions has been considered alongside written submissions and online survey responses and is reflected in this report.

1.3 The three public in-person events were held as follows:

- Clifton House, Belfast, Monday 23rd February 2026
- Fermanagh House, Enniskillen, Wednesday 4th March 2026
- The Foyle Arena, Derry/Londonderry, Tuesday 10th March 2026

1.4 Two online events were also hosted on 16 February 2026 and 16 March 2026.

Sectoral events

1.5 DE officials attended consultation engagement sessions organised by sector representative organisations including the Northern Ireland Childminding Association, Early Years – the organisation for young people (EYO), Altram and the Education Authority Pre-School Education Group. A session was held with PlayBoard NI/School Age Forum to take on board the views of the school age sector, Children in Northern Ireland to explore the proposals and impact on the lives of children and young people, and EYO conducted an exercise to gather the views of young children on the Department's behalf. A targeted consultation event was also held for the pre-school sector and another for the Early Learning and Childcare Stakeholder Engagement Forum

(SEF), which is made up of some 50 representatives of key organisations and bodies with an interest in early learning and childcare policy.

Key issues raised during the public events

1.6 There was a wide range of views expressed during the public events, reflecting that this is a wide-reaching and comprehensive strategy which impacts parents, childcare providers, childcare practitioners and statutory and non-statutory pre-school education providers. In addition to providing an overview of the strategy, opportunities also arose to provide clarification.

Pre-school education and pre-school standardisation programmes

1.7 The role of the **Pre-School Education Programme (PSEP) and Pre-school Standardisation programme (PSP)** as reflected in the strategy was raised by a number of respondents, particularly statutory pre-schools. While they supported the relevant actions, some nursery teachers and principals advised that they were concerned that the inclusion of pre-school education in the wider ELC Strategy may lead to confusion about their role as early years educators and that the role of pre-school education as distinct from childcare provision could be diluted and may not be given the recognition it deserves.

“We would have welcomed two separate strategies: one focused on early learning, increasing capacity, resources and training in teacher-led nursery schools and units, and a second focused on childcare provision.”

1.8 Concern was also raised at the events about the number of **2-year-olds** accessing the pre-school education programme. Nursery teachers and principals emphasised that the pre-school programme is not appropriate provision for 2-year-olds as they are not yet developmentally ready for the programme and require additional adult intervention. As such, there was concern that the action to make legislative changes to amend the age range for the pre-school education programme has been designated a longer term category 3 action, rather than an action to be taken forward at pace, although others noted the link between that action and the action to develop a programme for this age group.

1.9 Some attendees had concerns about the action to consult on a proposal to remove the statutory socially disadvantaged circumstances criterion for the pre-school education programme. These concerns were mainly centred around the timing of removal, with some advising that they thought the criterion should stay until the pre-school standardisation programme delivers universal, full-time pre-school education provision. They felt this may help children from disadvantaged circumstances to access full-time pre-school provision where it is available, and therefore, for those within the group who are eligible, increase access to free school meals. Others advised that the criterion should be removed immediately, as they consider it unnecessary and a barrier to equitable access to local pre-school education provision, particularly for the children of working parents.

The role of school age childcare

1.10 Representatives from the **school age childcare (SAC)** sector were concerned that there were not enough explicit references to the importance of SAC in the document, or clear actions which indicated that SAC would have a role in the implementation of the strategy.

“School-age childcare is a key enabler of parental employment, child well-being and community resilience. However, it remains under-recognised and under-resourced within current policy frameworks. Without explicit recognition in the final Strategy, there is a real risk that the needs of school-age children aged 4–11 will continue to be overlooked.”

Affordability concerns: increasing childcare fees and fee-capping

1.11 Parents attending the events raised concerns about **increasing childcare fees** and concerns that the Northern Ireland Childcare Subsidy Scheme was being eroded by increases in fees. There was a call for Government to act to cap the fees being charged by childcare providers, in particular by mirroring the fee-capping approach being used in the Republic of Ireland.

ELC Services for children with Special Educational Needs and/or Disabilities

1.12A common theme raised by childcare providers and statutory and non-statutory pre-school education providers was the additional pressures caused by increasing numbers of children presenting with special educational needs (SEN) and/or disabilities. It was clear that staff were doing everything they could to deliver for the children and young people in their provision, but they felt that they were not being given the support they needed to meet their needs.

Section 2: Overview of online and written responses

- 2.1 In total, there were **469 responses** to the consultation process. Of these, 413 responded using the online survey and 56 provided written responses.
- 2.2 The online survey was developed and managed by DE and hosted on the Citizen Space platform on NI Direct. It encouraged individuals and organisations to give their views on the three strategic themes and nine strategic objectives and associated impact assessments. It provided a coherent way for respondents to submit views on their level of agreement to each thematic objective and provide further information, should they wish. **When considering the extent to which respondents have ‘agreed’ or ‘disagreed’ with a particular objective or action, it has been important to consider the reason why they have done so. For example, in many cases, respondents have made it clear that it has not been the objective (or action) that they disagree with in principle, but rather the plans for implementation, including the timescale for delivery. This distinction has proved important when considering the analysis, and determining what respondents are actually telling us.**
- 2.3 Of the 413 responses to the online consultation, 326 were received from individuals and 87 from organisations (set out in the table below).

Table 1: Sector by Organisation Type

Organisation Type	Count
Total Childcare Provider	70
Childminder	2
Crèche	2
Day Nursery	14
Out of School	4
Non-statutory Pre-School Education Playgroup/Playgroup	22
Primary School	2
Statutory Nursery School/Unit	14
Sure Start*	3
Other	7
Total Other Organisations	17
Charity/ Community/ Voluntary	7
Statutory body	3
Other	7

*A number of Sure Start lead bodies have also responded in a separate capacity.

Table 2: Individual Respondents

Respondent Type	Count
Total Individuals	326
A Parent or Guardian	171
A Grandparent	4
An Early Learning Childcare Practitioner	96
Other	88

*Note: Individuals could select more than one option, meaning the total will sum to more than the number of respondents.

2.4 The main findings from the consultation survey are set out at **Section 3**.

2.5 56 written submissions were emailed directly to the Department as part of the consultation. 51 submissions were from organisations, one was a combined response on behalf of academics and four were received from individuals. A list of the organisations who responded via written submission is attached at Annex A. The organisations who responded via written submission tended to be key stakeholders in the early learning and childcare sphere and also key advocacy groups such as Trade Unions, groups representing women’s rights, groups representing children and those promoting equality and human rights. Given that these submissions did not typically follow the survey format, an overview of the key issues raised is included separately in **Section 4**.

Consultation Process



The consultation ran for **14 weeks**



5 engagement events were hosted by DE:
3 in-person and **2** online



469 responses were received:
413 online and **56** written



Overall, agreement rates were high for all objectives ranging between **77% to 86%**



The highest was with Objective 3.3 (Enhance the early years infrastructure through a skilled and valued workforce) at **86%**



The views expressed through this consultation will inform a final strategy to be agreed by the Executive

Section 3: Consultation Survey Analysis

3.1 The consultation online survey results have been collated in line with the layout of the survey and draft ELC Strategy and are detailed below.

THEME 1 – Supporting Children in Their Early Years

Outcome:

- All children get the developmental support needed in their early years to ensure the best start in life, including those facing disadvantage.

Objective 1.1: Provide 22.5 hours per week through the pre-school education programme for children in their target pre-school year.

OBJECTIVE 1.1: PROVIDE 22.5 HOURS PRE-SCHOOL EDUCATION PER WEEK FOR CHILDREN IN THEIR TARGET PRE-SCHOOL YEAR	
<u>CATEGORY 1 ACTIONS</u> Those already underway. (April 2024 to March 2026)	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• By March 2026, approve an additional 4,700 full-time (22.5 hours per week) funded pre-school education places with a free school meal for eligible children, meaning that half of all funded pre-school education places in all areas across Northern Ireland will be provided on a full-time (22.5 hours per week) basis by September 2026.• Implement a revised funding model for non-statutory pre-school education provision that includes paid release time for planning, administration, training and Early Years Specialist support, full staffing costs and overheads.
<u>CATEGORY 2 ACTIONS</u> Those that will be prioritised next subject to available resources. (April 2026 to March 2030)	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• In September 2026, consult on legislative changes to remove the current statutory admissions criteria prioritising children from socially disadvantaged circumstances when applying for funded pre-school education places.• By September 2029, approve 75% funded pre-school places across Northern Ireland on a full-time (22.5 hours per week) basis.

CATEGORY 3 ACTIONS Those that may take longer to implement. (April 2030 to March 2034)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Continue to progress Pre-School standardisation, with the aim to provide a funded full-time pre-school education place for all target aged children whose parents want it. • Make legislative changes, subject to consultation, to amend the age range for funded statutory pre-school provision, removing the current requirement to enrol children in their penultimate pre-school year.
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Overall response to Objective 1.1

408 responses were received to this Objective. Of those 408, 330 (81%) agreed or strongly agreed with the objective and its associated actions, 36 (9%) neither agreed nor disagreed, and 42 (10%) disagreed or strongly disagreed.

Figure 1: Responses to Objective 1.1 by Agreement Rate (%)



Total responses to this question = 408. Note, percentages may not sum to 100% due to rounding.

Agree / Strongly Agree (81%)

Respondents welcomed the expansion of funded pre-school provision, seeing longer hours and greater access as a positive step for children’s early development, school readiness and also in supporting families. Comments strongly supported wider availability of full-time places for all pre-school children, for both disadvantaged children and working parents.

Some respondents commented raising concern about the appropriateness of PSEP provision for penultimate aged children. Successful delivery was viewed as dependent on adequate funding, fair admissions arrangements, staffing capacity and protection of quality across statutory and non-statutory settings.

“I think every child having these hours is fantastic.”

“We support the commitment to provide 22.5 hours of high-quality pre-school education. However, the success of this objective is fundamentally contingent on workforce capacity, remuneration, and retention.”

Neither Agree nor Disagree (9%)

Comments reflected support for the principle of extended funded pre-school education provision but expressed uncertainty about implementation. As with the majority views above, common concerns related to funding sustainability, admissions criteria, and also raised the impact on existing providers, and whether longer hours would be delivered consistently across different settings. Many comments suggested that the idea was positive in principle but not sufficiently clear or developed to endorse fully at this stage.

“We welcome the ambition to expand access to 22.5 hours of funded pre-school provision and recognise the potential benefits for children and families. However, we have significant concerns regarding implementation and unintended consequences.”

Disagree / Strongly Disagree (10%)

Concerns expressed focussed on the length of time it may take to achieve universal full-time pre-school education provision, the risk of displacing existing settings during implementation and the risk of blurring the distinction between childcare and education. Some respondents were concerned about the potential for a displacement effect on private and voluntary childcare provision. Concerns were also raised about the statutory admissions criterion, with views both in favour of and against removal. For this group, the proposals were seen as not being implemented quickly enough, lacking in operational detail or potentially destabilising.

“This does not support parents of children who require full daycare so they can go to work.”

“By implementing this it will destroy the registered childminding sector.”

“Can you not implement all of the above within 12 months or is this strategy for a different generation?”

Responses by Respondent Type

Of the 408 responses received for Objective 1.1, 323 (79%) were from individuals and 85 from organisations (21%). Breakdowns by respondent type are available below.

Table 3: Responses to Objective 1.1 by Respondent Type

Objective 1.1 Category	Strongly Agree & Agree	Neither Agree nor Disagree	Strongly Disagree & Disagree	Total	
				N	%
Individual	264	24	35	323	79
Childminder	1	1	0	2	0.5
Crèche	1	1	0	2	0.5
Day Nursery	7	4	2	13	3
Out of School	2	1	1	4	1
Non-statutory Pre-School Education Playgroup/ Playgroup	19	3	0	22	5
Primary School	1	0	1	2	0.5
Statutory Nursery School/Unit	13	0	1	14	3
Sure Start	3	0	0	3	0.7
Other	19	2	2	23	6
Total	330	36	42	408	

Respondents were invited to give further comments on Objective 1.1 and its associated actions, and 241 comments were received.

Overall comments

Across respondents, there was broad and strongly expressed support for standardising pre-school education provision, particularly session length, but concerns were also raised about the speed of implementation and equity of access.

“Expanding access to full-time (22.5 hours) funded pre-school education is well aligned with evidence that sustained, high-quality early learning supports children’s development, school readiness and longer-term outcomes”

Responses were mixed in regard to proposed changes to statutory admissions criteria, with some arguing the current criteria disadvantages those just above threshold for welfare support and those who have limited access to more informal types of childcare. Others warned of the risk of widening inequality, particularly if the changes are implemented ahead of the universal roll-out of full-time pre-school education sessions.

“Important to address the disadvantages to working parents who have unfairly been impacted by the statutory admissions criteria.”

“I recognise that removing this criterion would allow working families to reduce their childcare bill and increase working hours. However socially disadvantaged children need to be prioritised.”

Pre-school playgroups and primary schools welcomed the intention to remove the requirement to admit younger children into pre-school education settings, providing views on the negative impacts of the current arrangements in terms of age-appropriate learning, staff capacity, and adult-to-child ratios.

“Children in their penultimate pre-school year are not appropriately placed in statutory nursery schools/units.”

“It would be wholly unacceptable and detrimental to have 2 yr olds in pre-school educational settings.”

Statutory nursery settings stressed the importance of preserving the educational identity of pre-school education, warning that moves toward full-time models could create a perception of pre-school education being childcare and risk the number of pre-school education places overall.

“Playgroups should also have qualified teachers so that each child is getting the same opportunity to start their education.”

“It is education and should be taught by a qualified teacher.”

There was also strong emphasis on improved support for children with special educational needs (SEN), with several respondents noting recruitment challenges and the need for specialist provision and earlier intervention. This was echoed in wider responses, indicating that respondents consider this to be an issue that stretches beyond the pre-school education sector.

“I agree that full time provision should be made available to target age pre-school children, however this should be fully supported by correct adult:child ratios and support for children with SEN.”

“We agree with this objective – we want to see SEN pre-school children, accessing 22.5 hours.”

Providers expressed widespread concern about the sustainability of existing childcare services in the context of universally available full-time pre-school education provision. Childminders feared reduced demand for home-based care, lower earnings, and potential exits from the sector, particularly if ratios for younger children in childminding settings remain unchanged. Day nurseries and crèches warned that increases in funded education provision would threaten the viability of their business, with parents needing less childcare as a result of longer days in funded education provision. Crèche providers also questioned whether pre-school education standardisation would strengthen education or simply shift funding between sectors.

Overall, respondents strongly supported pre-school education standardisation but stressed the need for careful implementation that protects equity and sustainability.

Objective 1.2: Expand services for children facing disadvantage and children with additional needs.

OBJECTIVE 1.2: EXPAND SERVICES FOR CHILDREN FACING DISADVANTAGE	
<p>CATEGORY 1 ACTIONS</p> <p>Those already underway. (April 2024 to March 2026)</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Provide at least 10% funding boost to enable the Sure Start programme to meet rising demand from over 36,200 eligible children and their families. • Expand the Sure Start programme to bring within scope an additional 22 most disadvantaged Super Output Areas in Northern Ireland on a permanent basis, increasing access to an additional 2,500 children and their families. • Further expand Sure Start by introducing a new outreach model, enabling access to around 1,800 additional children and families with evidenced need, regardless of geographical location. • Fund at least 175 Pathway projects and increase the maximum level of awards from £30,000 to £40,000. • Introduce a new Pathway funding stream to provide targeted support for over 650 childminders and Approved Home Childcarers (AHC).

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Provide enhanced funding to stabilise the Toybox project ensuring that service levels meet the needs of over 150 Traveller and Roma families. • Undertake a scoping study to identify the needs of newcomer children (0–4 years) in Northern Ireland and how they may be supported within an expanded Toybox project.
<p>CATEGORY 2 ACTIONS</p> <p>Those that will be prioritised next subject to available resources. (April 2026 to March 2030)</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Continue the category 1 expansions of targeted early learning programmes (Sure Start, Pathway and Toybox) until March 2030 to meet increasing service demands, with the provision of annual inflationary uplifts to consolidate the expanded provision. • Commission a scoping study to report by March 2027 on options for further expansion of the Sure Start programme. • Subject to the findings of the scoping study, expand the Sure Start programme to meet identified need. • By March 2028, expand the Toybox project to include support for Newcomer children (0–4 years) and their families. • In 2027, conduct a feasibility study of the potential to provide special school pre-school provision on a full-time (22.5 hours per week) basis.
<p>CATEGORY 3 ACTIONS</p> <p>Those that may take longer to implement. (April 2030 to March 2034)</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Continue the expansions of targeted early learning programmes (Sure Start, Pathway and Toybox) in Categories 1 and 2 until March 2034 to meet increasing service demands, with the provision of annual inflationary uplifts to consolidate the expanded provision. • Agree protocol for sharing of information on children’s developmental journeys at key transition points, to support forward planning and ensure better continuity of support.

Overall response to Objective 1.2

410 responses were received to this Objective. Of those 410, 314 (77%) agreed or strongly agreed with the objective and its associated actions, 61 (15%) neither agreed nor disagreed, and 35 (9%) disagreed or strongly disagreed.

Figure 2: Responses to Objective 1.2 by Agreement Rate (%)



Total responses to this question = 410. Note, percentages may not sum to 100% due to rounding.

Agree / Strongly Agree (77%)

There was strong agreement for the strengthening of targeted early intervention and disadvantage-focused provision, often highlighting the value of Sure Start, community programmes and practical support for vulnerable families. Many saw this as an important way to improve outcomes early, but still emphasised that local delivery, stable funding and joined-up work across services would be essential for equitable and effective support.

“Expanding targeted early learning programmes like Sure Start, Pathway and Toybox will strengthen the whole early years system and create more inclusive, better-supported environments for all children.”

Neither Agree nor Disagree (15%)

There was overall support for the objective combined with concern about gaps in reach and implementation. This group widely acknowledged the importance of targeted early intervention but some questioned whether the proposed model was sufficiently broad, equitable or joined up. Comments highlighted the contribution of community-based provision, teacher-led nursery provision, with some suggesting that important forms of support are still not fully recognised.

“Any expansion of Sure Start must include guaranteed, protected funding so current services are not weakened.”

Disagree / Strongly Disagree (9%)

Whilst, in the main, respondents agreed with the objective, they wanted to highlight some concerns. Some felt this objective overlooked effective existing interventions or failed to support these adequately. Comments referred to programmes such as Lifestart, rural gaps, and the risk that support would remain uneven or overly dependent on geography. A number of comments raised the need for more support for working families.

“Schemes such as Sure Start should be available to all children regardless of postcode.”

“Sure Start programs should be available to all new mothers & their babies for the first year at least.”

“I believe Sure Start is excellent and that it should definitely be expanded. However I feel that it should not be only for ‘eligible’ children who are disadvantaged, newcomers or have SEN. It should be available to all families and working parents should not be discriminated against”.

Responses by Respondent Type

Of the 410 responses received for Objective 1.2, 324 (79%) were from individuals and 86 from organisations (21%). Breakdowns by respondent type are available below.

Table 4: Responses to Objective 1.2 by Respondent Type

Objective 1.2 Category	Strongly Agree & Agree	Neither Agree nor Disagree	Strongly Disagree & Disagree	Total	
				N	%
Individual	254	40	30	324	79
Childminder	1	1	0	2	0.5
Crèche	0	1	1	2	0.5
Day Nursery	7	6	1	14	3
Out of School	4	0	0	4	1
Non-statutory Pre-School Education Playgroup/ Playgroup	19	3	0	22	5
Primary School	1	1	0	2	0.5
Statutory Nursery School/Unit	10	3	1	14	3
Sure Start	1	2	0	3	0.7
Other	17	4	2	23	6
Total	314	61	35	410	

Respondents were invited to give further comments on Objective 1.2 and its associated actions, and 206 comments were received.

Overall comments

Across all respondent groups, there was strong consensus on the importance of early intervention and accessibility of targeted supports for children experiencing disadvantage or emerging additional needs. Individuals, pre-school playgroups, statutory nursery units, and primary-attached nurseries consistently identified early years settings as the first point where developmental concerns are

recognised, often before formal assessment or diagnosis. Long waiting lists and eligibility barriers were highlighted as major challenges, leaving many children without support during critical developmental periods. Sure Start and outreach-based programmes were widely viewed as essential in improving early identification, engaging hard-to-reach families, and supporting children before entry into statutory education.

“Sure Start is a lifeline... it helped me when I was exhausted.”

“I have found the support from Pathway provided children in my childcare setting with improved educational outcomes and I am excited for the children if this continues to improve.”

Providers across childminding, crèche, day nursery, and out-of-school settings emphasised the need for continuity of support across environments. Many noted that children often lose targeted assistance when transitioning between settings, particularly from statutory provision to private or afterschool care. Inclusion without adequate funding or staffing was described as financially and operationally challenging, with concerns around supervision, ratios and sustainability. Respondents stressed that effective inclusion should not place providers at risk and requires aligned funding models to ensure consistent, high-quality support throughout a child’s early learning journey.

“Too many SEN needs are being missed before children reach pre-school.”

Objective 1.3: Extend developmental provision for children aged 2-3 (in their pre-pre-school year).

OBJECTIVE 1.3: EXPAND DEVELOPMENTAL PROVISION FOR CHILDREN AGED 2–3 (IN THEIR PRE-PRE-SCHOOL YEAR)	
<p><u>CATEGORY 1</u> ACTIONS</p> <p>Those already underway. (April 2024 to March 2026)</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Provide 1,790 2–3-year-olds with access to the Sure Start Developmental Programme in current and expanded geographical areas and through a new Outreach model.
<p><u>CATEGORY 2</u> ACTIONS</p> <p>Those that will be prioritised next subject to available resources. (April 2026 to March 2030)</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Progressively extend access to developmental support for children aged 2–3, initially prioritising children facing disadvantage and those with additional needs. • Develop a holistic approach to child development through integrated family-centred services which brings together Allied Health Professionals, Speech and Language Therapists, early years practitioners, family support teams, and others to develop a targeted programme for children with emerging additional needs, including support for parents and families.
<p><u>CATEGORY 3</u> ACTIONS</p> <p>Those that may take longer to implement. (April 2030 to March 2034)</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Provide access to appropriate developmental provision for all children aged 2–3 (in their pre-pre-school year).

Overall response to Objective 1.3

405 responses were received to this Objective. Of those 405, 317 (78%) agreed or strongly agreed with the objective and its associated actions, 47 (12%) neither agreed nor disagreed, and 41 (10%) disagreed or strongly disagreed.

Figure 3: Responses to Objective 1.3 by Agreement Rate (%)



Total responses to this question = 405. Note, percentages may not sum to 100% due to rounding.

Agree / Strongly Agree (78%)

Those who agreed or strongly agreed supported extending developmental provision for two and three-year-olds, particularly where this could improve speech, language, social development and earlier identification of need. Comments often linked the proposal to better long-term outcomes, while also noting that expansion would only succeed if backed by specialist input, health collaboration, and sufficient capacity to avoid uneven access across areas.

“Extending developmental provision to the 2–3 age group is one of the most important elements of the strategy.”

“A multi-disciplinary approach is vital for children and families.”

Neither Agree nor Disagree (12%)

Neutral responses generally supported earlier developmental support for younger children but raised concerns about fairness of access and how expansion would work in practice. Comments raised potential for displacement of other services and the need for better links with health and specialist services. Many suggested that the principle was sound, but delivery arrangements remained uncertain, seeking clarity and raised concern for the long-term implementation of universal access.

“We need clarity on what 'developmental support' means for the 2-3 year age group.”

“I have no faith that such a scheme will ever reach implementation.”

Disagree / Strongly Disagree (10%)

Those disagreeing with this objective frequently raised concerns that expansion for two and three year-olds could dilute existing provision, create postcode inequalities or fail to meet demand in a meaningful way. Some argued that current resources are already stretched and that extending programmes without sufficient workforce and specialist capacity would reduce quality. Comments from working parents raised the lack of visibility of their needs being met through this objective.

“Expanding access without clear commitments to workforce development, specialist expertise, and multi-agency capacity risks stretching existing services too thinly.”

“The timeline for universal access for 2-3 year olds is too slow.”

“This policy should include working parents also.”

Responses by Respondent Type

Of the 405 responses received for Objective 1.3, 322 (80%) were from individuals and 83 (21%) from organisations. Breakdowns by respondent type are available below.

Table 5: Responses to Objective 1.3 by Respondent Type

Objective 1.3 Category	Strongly Agree & Agree	Neither Agree nor Disagree	Strongly Disagree & Disagree	Total	
				N	%
Individual	251	35	36	322	80
Childminder	1	0	1	2	0.5
Crèche	0	1	1	2	0.5
Day Nursery	9	4	1	14	3
Out of School	4	0	0	4	1
Non-statutory Pre-School Education Playgroup/ Playgroup	20	1	1	22	5
Primary School	2	0	0	2	0.5
Statutory Nursery School/Unit	11	2	0	13	3
Sure Start	1	1	1	3	0.7
Other	18	3	0	21	5
Total	317	47	41	405	

Respondents were invited to give further comments on Objective 1.3 and its associated actions, and 197 comments were received.

Overall comments

Across all respondent groups, there was strong support for providing earlier developmental programmes for children aged 2–3, before entry to the funded pre-school year. Contributors consistently emphasised that many children present with speech, communication, social, emotional and SEN-related needs before age three, yet often face long waits for assessment or diagnosis. Early intervention was widely viewed as critical to addressing emerging delays, improving developmental outcomes, and supporting smoother transitions into formal early learning settings. Family-centred and outreach-based approaches were highlighted as particularly important in engaging children who are not yet accessing centre-based provision and in preparing both children and families for pre-school participation.

“This will help develop social skills and ease transition into pre-school.”

Providers across childminding, crèche, day nursery, playgroup, school-based and Sure Start settings stressed the value of delivering early support in familiar environments with strong parental involvement. Integrated guidance, mentoring and multi-agency collaboration were seen as key to early identification of need and reducing unmet developmental challenges at later stages. Many practitioners reported being the first to notice emerging difficulties and felt that earlier access to coordinated support would improve readiness, continuity and engagement when children move into nursery and pre-school education.

“More support is needed for 2–3-year-olds before difficulties escalate.”

Objective 1.4: Promote high-quality provision across all early learning and childcare providers.

OBJECTIVE 1.4: PROMOTE HIGH-QUALITY PROVISION ACROSS ALL EARLY LEARNING AND CHILDCARE PROVIDERS	
<p><u>CATEGORY 1 ACTIONS</u></p> <p>Those already underway. (April 2024 to March 2026)</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Increase the financial support for the development of the IM Pre-School Support Service. • Promote the value and benefits of play, providing professional training and development services to support best practice and promote inclusivity. • Promote speech, language and communication development for children in the early years and develop a series of universally accessible bite size videos. • Support staff within PSEP settings to engage more effectively with parents to create, sustain and improve positive and nurturing home learning environments. • Provide the BookTrust Bookstart Baby programme to all babies in their first year.
<p><u>CATEGORY 2 ACTIONS</u></p> <p>Those that will be prioritised next subject to available resources. (April 2026 to March 2030)</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • By March 2028, in consultation with early years experts, design and introduce an integrated Early Years Framework for children aged 0-6 that provides a single continuum for children below compulsory school age as they transition to formal education. The unified framework will be used in all ELC providers and will align with the Foundation Stage of the reformed statutory curriculum. The framework will set out broad expectations for children's development across key domains. • Promote stronger parent-practitioner partnerships across all education and ELC providers, building on existing Getting Ready to Learn Programme and other relevant initiatives including support for children who are pre-term. • Strengthen IM early years immersion and pedagogy through the roll-out of an IM Pre-School Immersion Education Course, including supporting stronger parent-practitioner partnerships. • Provide high-quality support services and professional advice to both non-statutory and statutory PSEP providers to develop good practice and support them to meet the needs of all children.

<p>CATEGORY 3 ACTIONS</p> <p>Those that may take longer to implement. (April 2030 to March 2034)</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Introduce a regional approach to ensuring timely and equitable access to speech and language support services in the early years. • Develop a Play Programme and guidance for inclusive early learning and childcare environments, both physical and learning, informed by professionals across Education and Health.
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Overall Response to Objective 1.4

405 responses were received to this Objective. Of those 405, 318 (79%) agreed or strongly agreed with the objective and its associated actions, 55 (14%) neither agreed nor disagreed, and 32 (8%) disagreed or strongly disagreed.

Figure 4: Responses to Objective 1.4 by Agreement Rate (%)



Total responses to this question = 405. Note, percentages may not sum to 100% due to rounding

Agree/strongly agree (79%)

Respondents agreed/strongly agreed to the promotion of high-quality provision across all early learning, education and childcare providers. They welcomed the emphasis on high-quality, play-based and coherent early years provision. Comments supported stronger speech and language input, better continuity across the 0–6 phase, and closer parent-practitioner partnerships. At the same time, many stressed that a shared framework would need to recognise existing curricula, the diversity of provider types and be implemented fairly, with sufficient support, specialist advice and resourcing across the sector. The need to recognise the role of teacher led provision in maintaining educational standards was also raised.

“As a parent, knowing that standards are high and consistent wherever your child attends is vital for confidence and peace of mind.”

“The strategy must explicitly acknowledge that the qualifications, experience, training, and assessment expertise of nursery school teachers and staff are critical to enhanced early learning outcomes for children.”

Neither Agree nor Disagree (14%)

Respondents with a neutral view agreed with the importance of quality but were unsure whether the Strategy clearly defined how quality would be supported across the whole sector. Comments raised questions about who would shape the framework, how expertise from frontline practitioners would be used, and whether funding and specialist advice would be available equitably. The need to distinguish and recognise the difference in educational and childcare settings and the need to address differences in regulation across provider types including staff to child ratios was also raised. Many agreed with the ambition but felt the route to delivery was too vague.

“There are different standards, inspection criteria and staffing ratios. These differences must be addressed.”

“Pre-school is not childcare.”

“Need to distinguish between pre-school childcare and nursery education with qualified teachers.”

Disagree/Strongly Disagree (8%)

Respondents commonly objected to aspects of the proposed quality framework on the grounds of fairness, priority or cultural emphasis. Some comments argued that resources should focus more directly on SEN support and consistent quality across all settings before introducing new approaches. The distinct role of early years educators was raised and the need to recognise their expertise. The main theme was that quality improvement should be more practical, more even across the sector, with more clarity needed on how quality will be supported and sustained.

“Any new framework must not be a 'one-size-fits-all' document that lowers expectations to suit non-teacher-led settings.”

“Early Years teachers and assistants are critical to early childhood outcomes. These roles are not interchangeable with childcare roles.

Responses by Respondent type

Of the 405 responses received for Objective 1.4, 321 (79%) were from individuals and 84 (21%) from organisations. Breakdowns by respondent type are available below.

Table 6: Responses to Objective 1.3 by Respondent Type

Objective 1.4 Category	Strongly Agree & Agree	Neither Agree nor Disagree	Strongly Disagree & Disagree	Total	
				N	%
Individual	258	36	27	321	79
Childminder	1	1	0	2	0.5
Crèche	2	0	0	2	0.5
Day Nursery	7	5	1	13	3
Out of School	2	2	0	4	1
Non-statutory Pre-School Education Playgroup/ Playgroup	17	3	1	21	5
Primary School	2	0	0	2	0.5
Statutory Nursery School/Unit	8	3	3	14	3
Sure Start	2	1	0	3	0.7
Other	19	4	0	23	6
Total	318	55	32	405	

Respondents were invited to give further comments on Objective 1.4 and its associated actions, 186 comments were received.

Overall comments

Responses across all settings consistently emphasised the importance of high-quality, inclusive early learning environments that support children’s communication, social and emotional development. Many respondents highlighted early intervention as critical, particularly for speech, language and communication needs, and noted that early years providers are often the first to identify emerging SEN. Practitioners stressed the value of play-based approaches and the need for consistent, joined-up support so children’s developmental progress is sustained across home, pre-school,

daycare and school-age provision. Some were keen to ensure that the importance of school-age childcare was not lost.

“School-Age Childcare is a key enabler of parental employment, child well-being and community resilience. However, it remains under-recognised and under-resourced within current policy frameworks. Without explicit recognition in the final Strategy, there is a real risk that the needs of school-age children aged 4–11 will continue to be overlooked.”

Across sectors, there was strong concern about capacity, training and funding. Providers reported a need for increased practitioner support, improved access to specialist training, and clearer funding models to maintain safe adult-to-child ratios and inclusive practice. Several respondents described challenges in sustaining support during transitions between settings, with 1:1 or SEN support often not continuing. Others raised the professionalism of early years educators and distinction between early education and childcare. Overall, the feedback highlights that while high quality inclusive practice is widely valued, it must be underpinned by adequate resources, coordinated services and professional support to be effective and sustainable.

“This requires a more explicit focus on aligning childcare provision with SEN reform and early intervention systems, investing in specialist provision and workforce capacity, and ensuring that models of provision are flexible and responsive to individual needs. Without this, there is a risk that the Strategy will improve access for some children while leaving others behind.”

THEME 2: Supporting families with their children's learning and childcare costs

Outcomes:

- Families can access more affordable childcare that meets their needs
- Families are better equipped to understand and support their child’s learning

Objective 2.1: Make childcare more affordable

OBJECTIVE 2.1: MAKE CHILDCARE MORE AFFORDABLE	
<p>CATEGORY 1 ACTIONS</p> <p>Those already underway. (April 2024 to March 2026)</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Introduce a bespoke NICSS providing a 15% subsidy on childcare costs for eligible working families. When combined with TFC this will reduce bills by up to 32%.
<p>CATEGORY 2 ACTIONS</p> <p>Those that will be prioritised next subject to available resources. (April 2026 to March 2030)</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Increase the NICSS contribution to 20% for all eligible children from April 2026. Combined with TFC this will reduce bills by up to 36%. • Subject to satisfactory real time evaluation of the NICSS expansion and analysis of fees, incrementally increase the subsidy up to 30% by April 2030. Combined with TFC this will provide a deduction on childcare bills up to 44%. • Introduce fee publication requirements for those providers operating the NICSS, to produce greater transparency on the costs of childcare across all providers and enable increases to be monitored and reported. • Annually increase the cap on the maximum subsidy which can be claimed through the NICSS in line with the associated subsidy percentage and inflation. • Raise awareness of the full range of financial support available with the costs of childcare, including through the NICSS, TFC, UC and targeted initiatives for those undergoing education/training.

<p>CATEGORY 3 ACTIONS</p> <p>Those that may take longer to implement. (April 2030 to March 2034)</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Subject to satisfactory real time evaluation of the NICSS expansion and analysis of fees, increase the subsidy up to 40% by April 2032. Combined with TFC, this will provide a total deduction on childcare bills of up to 52%. • Extend Digital Economy Act (DEA) powers to Northern Ireland and DE to enable sharing of information from TFC to streamline verification requirements for NICSS users.
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Overall response to objective 2.1

405 responses were received to this Objective. Of those 405, 316 (78%) agreed or strongly agreed with the objective and its associated actions, 44 (11%) disagreed or strongly disagreed and 45 (11%) neither agreed nor disagreed.

Figure 5: Responses to Objective 2.1 by Agreement rate (%)



Total responses to this question = 405. Note, percentages may not sum to 100% due to rounding.

Agree / Strongly Agree (78%)

Respondents strongly welcomed action on childcare affordability and saw subsidy support as an important means of helping parents remain in work. Many described current costs as unsustainable and viewed stronger public support as overdue. Positive comments also cautioned that affordability measures must be properly funded and designed in a way that support providers’ viability rather than transferring additional financial pressure onto settings. Comments welcomed clearer information and transparency on childcare fees and raised the need for fee regulation with benefits being eroded by increased costs, and the need for quicker implementation of affordability measures.

“I strongly support Objective 2.1, as making childcare more affordable is essential for working families like ours.”

“Fee controls must be part of the strategy.”

“I strongly agree that working parents need to receive 52% of their childcare bills, but this must be effective immediately.”

Neither Agree nor Disagree (11%)

Neutral respondents recognised that affordability is a major issue but questioned whether the subsidy model as proposed would deliver enough benefit in practice. Comments echoed those from respondents that Strongly Agreed/Agreed with this objective, often referring to administrative burdens of the subsidy scheme, provider sustainability and the risk that families would see limited gains if fee caps were not applied. Concerns that the system remained complex or underfunded were also raised. The overall response was supportive in intent, but uncertain about whether the chosen mechanism was the right one.

“Parents are never going to be able to feel the benefit if no financial support is offered to providers.”

“You need to cap nursery fees whilst also providing the maximum childcare contributions now rather than wait to 2032.”

Disagree / Strongly Disagree (11%)

Respondents who disagreed or strongly disagreed generally saw the affordability proposals as insufficiently ambitious or inequitable. Comments argued that the scale of subsidy proposed would not keep pace with real childcare costs, and some felt the model favoured better-off families while doing too little for those experiencing the greatest hardship. Concerns about fee inflation, weak fee regulation and absence of stronger cost controls were common throughout this group, as were provider sustainability concerns and concern regarding delivery.

“Any subsidies are wiped out by caps and fees rising to extortionate amounts.”

“Doesn’t go anywhere near far enough and needs implemented immediately.”

Views by respondent type

The majority of respondents under each category either Strongly Agree or Agree with this objective

Responses by Respondent Type

Of the 405 responses received for Objective 2.1, 319 (79%) were from individuals and 86 (21%) from organisations. Breakdowns by respondent type are available below.

Table 7: Responses to Objective 2.1 by Respondent Type

Objective 2.1 Category	Strongly Agree & Agree	Neither Agree nor Disagree	Strongly Disagree & Disagree	Total	
				N	%
Individual	247	32	40	319	79
Childminder	1	1	0	2	0.5
Crèche	1	1	0	2	0.5
Day Nursery	10	3	1	14	3
Out of School	3	0	1	4	1
Non-statutory Pre-School Education Playgroup/ Playgroup	20	2	0	22	5
Primary School	1	0	1	2	0.5
Statutory Nursery School/Unit	12	2	0	14	3
Sure Start	1	2	0	3	0.7
Other	20	2	1	23	6
Total	316	45	44	405	

Respondents were invited to give further comments on Objective 2.1 and its associated actions, and 238 comments were received.

Overall comments

Respondents across all groups strongly agreed that childcare affordability is a key factor in accessing services, with high costs often forcing parents to reduce working hours or leave employment

altogether. Many highlighted the potential of subsidy schemes, such as NICSS, to increase uptake among working families by easing financial pressure. Parents emphasised that childcare expenses can outweigh the benefits of employment, while providers across crèches, day nurseries, and pre-school settings stressed that consistent government support and transparent funding mechanisms are vital to maintaining both accessibility and sector sustainability.

“The introduction of the Northern Ireland Childcare Subsidy Scheme (NICSS) and the planned phased increases in subsidy levels have the potential to significantly reduce childcare costs for many families.”

“I reduced my working hours because childcare cost more than my wages.”

Providers, including childminders, out-of-school services, and schools, emphasised that affordability measures must balance reducing costs for families with maintaining viable provision. Wraparound and school-age childcare were identified as essential in supporting parental employment, while playgroups and statutory nursery settings highlighted funding challenges and staff pressures. Schools and Sure Start providers noted that cost barriers and limited awareness of support can restrict access, particularly for working families.

“It is essential that affordability measures are properly funded and do not place additional financial pressure on childcare providers.”

In addition to concerns about the lack of fee regulation, concerns were also raised about practices such as full-day retention fees and a need for clearer more transparent cost structures. Although welcome, the pace and level of support was consistently raised.

“Strongly agree with all actions but would add they should go further and faster.”

Objective 2.2: Improve the information available on childcare

OBJECTIVE 2.2: IMPROVE THE INFORMATION AVAILABLE ON CHILDCARE	
<p><u>CATEGORY 1</u> ACTIONS</p> <p>Those already underway (April 2024 to March 2026)</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Encourage uptake of financial support with the costs of childcare, through a promotional campaign to raise awareness of all government support available. • Conduct and publish Northern Ireland Childcare Survey Official Statistics.
<p><u>CATEGORY 2</u> ACTIONS</p> <p>Those that will be prioritised next subject to available resources. (April 2026 to March 2030)</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Provide enhanced information to inform parental decisions in pre-school admissions. • Establish regular and ongoing sector wide data collection and monitoring to: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • map supply and demand of childcare provision across all geographical areas; and • identify sustainability challenges in specific areas. • Design and implement a regular data collection programme to monitor trends in childcare requirements and labour market decisions.
<p><u>CATEGORY 3</u> ACTIONS</p> <p>Those that may take longer to implement. (April 2030 to March 2034)</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Develop a user-friendly digital platform to improve access to information for parents and providers, taking account of existing FSNI platform and the need to integrate with Make the Call and NI Direct. • Establish a parental support programme for parents of children aged 0–4 with SEN/D. • Provide enhanced information to parents on the capacity of registered childcare providers to provide inclusive and accessible provision for children with SEN/D.

Overall response to objective 2.2

404 responses were received to this Objective. Of those 404, 326 (81%) agreed or strongly agreed with the objective and its associated actions, 54 (13%) neither agreed nor disagreed, and 24 (6%) disagreed or strongly disagreed.

Figure 6: Responses to Objective 2.2 by Agreement Rate



Total responses to this question = 404. Note, percentages may not sum to 100% due to rounding.

Agree or Strongly Agree (81%)

Respondents supported improving information for parents about childcare options, entitlements and learning support. They saw clearer guidance as helpful for families trying to navigate a complex system, particularly at transition points, and sought information on supply, including for SEN/D, rural provision and on costs. Supportive comments also noted, however, that digital tools and information requirements should be practical, accessible and not create unnecessary administrative burdens for providers.

“As a parent, I would welcome a single, easy-to-use source of up-to-date information that brings together childcare options, availability, costs and financial support.”

“Improving the availability and clarity of information for parents when making childcare and pre-school decisions is a welcome objective.”

Neither Agree or Disagree (13%)

Those who were neutral tended to agree that parents need better information, but many suggested the objective was too narrow or insufficiently connected to wider support systems. Comments often pointed to existing programmes, early intervention services and home-based support that should be better integrated rather than duplicated. The concern was less about the principle of clearer information and more about whether the proposed approach would be sufficiently joined up or meaningful.

“Currently child support services are already swamped with referrals therefore this must be addressed as a priority in order for this objective to be effectively implemented.”

Disagree or Strongly Disagree (6%)

Where responses were critical, they tended to argue that better information alone would not materially improve families' circumstances unless wider structural problems were addressed at the same time. Comments included the potential impact on providers and pointed to the need for much stronger integration between departments, clearer pathways to support, and language that focused more directly on helping families access learning and developmental support. For this group, the objective was seen as too limited and too detached from the wider system issues families face.

“While improved information is valuable, the proposals introduce significant data-collection and reporting expectations without addressing the workload implications for already over-stretched staff.”

Responses by Respondent Type

Of the 404 responses received for Objective 2.2, 320 (79%) were from individuals and 84 (21%) from organisations. Breakdowns by respondent type are available below.

Table 8: Responses to Objective 2.2 by Respondent Type

Objective 2.2 Category	Strongly Agree & Agree	Neither Agree nor Disagree	Strongly Disagree & Disagree	Total	
				N	%
Individual	258	41	21	320	79
Childminder	2	0	0	2	0.5
Crèche	0	2	0	2	0.5
Day Nursery	10	2	1	13	3
Out of School	3	0	1	4	1
Non-statutory Pre-School Education Playgroup/ Playgroup	18	4	0	22	5
Primary School	1	1	0	2	0.5
Statutory Nursery School/Unit	11	3	0	14	3
Sure Start	2	0	0	2	0.5
Other	21	1	1	23	6
Total	326	54	24	404	

Respondents were invited to give further comments on Objective 2.2 and its associated actions, and 153 comments were received.

Overall comments

Respondents across all groups supported the objective of improving information available on childcare, highlighting widespread difficulty in navigating fragmented systems. Individuals described unclear or incomplete guidance on eligibility, admissions, costs and local availability, which can hinder informed decision-making and budgeting. Childminders, crèches and day nurseries echoed the need for accessible, up-to-date public information on funding supports, timelines and provider availability, noting this would help families plan while also supporting provider sustainability. However, some providers cautioned that new information requirements should avoid adding to existing administrative burdens.

“Improving the availability, clarity, and accessibility of information is essential to enabling families to make informed decisions and access the support they are entitled to.”

“There needs to be much clearer universal messaging about what is available in the 1st years of a child’s life. For instance, there is a lot of confusion over terminology especially around childcare and nursery provision and this is very confusing for parents.”

Out-of-school and school-linked providers stressed that information platforms must include school-age and wraparound childcare, not only early years provision. Pre-school playgroups and nursery units reported delays and uncertainty around grants, admissions and guidance, limiting effective planning for staffing and inclusion. Statutory nursery schools emphasised the importance of clearly distinguishing between childcare and educational entitlements to improve parental understanding. Sure Start respondents highlighted the need for better signposting to community and multi-disciplinary supports, suggesting clearer pathways could enable earlier intervention and more coordinated support for families before entry to pre-school education.

“Improving information is important, but information alone will not reach many of the families who struggle most to access childcare. Parents experiencing poverty, language barriers, trauma, or low confidence in formal systems are unlikely to engage with digital platforms or promotional campaigns without additional support. Alongside improved data and online information, there should be investment in trusted, community-based support.”

THEME 3: Supporting the early years sector and workforce

Outcomes:

- A more stable and sustainable ELC sector with a highly trained and valued workforce
- More inclusive and accessible early years provision for children with additional needs

Objective 3.1: Build the sustainability and capacity of the Early Learning and Childcare sector.

OBJECTIVE 3.1: BUILD THE SUSTAINABILITY AND CAPACITY OF THE EARLY LEARNING & CHILDCARE SECTOR	
<p><u>CATEGORY 1</u> <u>ACTIONS</u></p> <p>Those already underway. (April 2024 to March 2026)</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Increase the non-statutory PSEP funding rate to bring it into line with the statutory sector. • Provide funding support to over 650 childminders/AHCs to support training and resource needs through the Pathway Fund. • Train 150 new childminders through Labour Market Partnerships. • Uplift the level of core funding providing early years sector support. • Publication of DfE research study on Childcare Providers Targeted Business Support.
<p><u>CATEGORY 2</u> <u>ACTIONS</u></p> <p>Those that will be prioritised next subject to available resources. (April 2026 to March 2030)</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Establish a Childcare Business Advisory service: DfE will lead the development and delivery of a childcare business advisory service: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Create a service that suits the needs of individual providers • Give all childcare providers access to a professional advisor who is equipped to identify those issues inhibiting the provider • Record common issues and opportunities within the Sector so that a holistic picture of the wider issues facing the Sector can be best understood, thereby enabling support to be tailored over time • Develop a Strategic Childcare Accessibility Fund, informed by mapping of supply and demand initially focused on: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Areas of disadvantage • Provision for children with additional needs • Rural provision • Social Enterprise provision

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Families working atypical hours wraparound care within the schools estate <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Establish a PSEP Strategic Support Fund to address short-term pressures in strategically important non-statutory pre-school education settings. Amend the current moratorium on Development Proposals (DPs) to facilitate requests for new or additional statutory pre-school provision to be established on a full-time basis. Provide annual inflationary uplifts to core early years funding.
<p>CATEGORY 3 ACTIONS</p> <p>Those that may take longer to implement. (April 2030 to March 2034)</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Ensure access to inclusive, high-quality early learning and childcare environments through increased capital funding, including for children with SEN. Continue annual inflationary uplifts to core early years funding.

Responses by Respondent Type

400 responses were received to this Objective. Of those 400, 317 (79%) agreed or strongly agreed with the objective and its associated actions, 54 (14%) neither agreed nor disagreed, and 29 (7%) disagreed or strongly disagreed.

Figure 7: Responses to Objective 3.1 by Agreement Rate (%)



Total responses to this question = 400. Note, percentages may not sum to 100% due to rounding

Agree/Strongly Agree (79%)

Those who agreed or strongly agreed broadly supported measures aimed at stabilising the sector through uplifts, targeted funds and greater strategic support. Many comments recognised that the sector needs immediate financial stability and welcomed acknowledgement of this in the strategy. At the same time, respondents argued that modest uplifts alone would not be enough, and that sustainability depends on funding that reflects the real cost of delivery across different provider types.

“The sustainability of the sector has been a longstanding concern, and the actions outlined represent a thoughtful, strategic approach to supporting providers, strengthening capacity, and ensuring long-term viability.”

Neither Agree nor Disagree (14%)

Neutral responses generally accepted the need to strengthen sustainability, but many questioned whether the Strategy gave enough attention to the full mixed economy of provision. Comments were varied highlighting the role of voluntary and charitable organisations with others focusing on statutory nursery provision and uncertainty about how financial commitments would be met. The prevailing view was that the issue had been identified correctly, but the proposed response lacked detail and assurance.

Business advisory may be beneficial though needs to be contextualised ensuring that the advisors fully understand the complexities of the sector.

Disagree/Strongly Disagree (7%)

Those who disagreed or strongly disagreed questioned whether the sustainability measures were credible or affordable at all, given wider public finance pressures and longstanding underinvestment. Some questioned whether the strategy could genuinely deliver the scale of support implied, while others felt the proposals still failed to value different types of provision including early education, registered childminding and non-statutory provision. Overall, this group saw the objective as unrealistic or disconnected from current financial reality.

“There is no way you can realistically meet these objectives year on year. You are already 300 million in debt.”

“While I welcome investment in the wider childcare sector, I am concerned that the current proposals risk diluting the central role of qualified teachers in early years education.”

Responses by Respondent Type

Of the 400 responses received for Objective 3.1, 318 (80%) were from individuals and 82 (21%) from organisations. Breakdowns by respondent type are available below.

Table 9: Responses to Objective 3.1 by Respondent Type

Objective 3.1 Category	Strongly Agree & Agree	Neither Agree nor Disagree	Strongly Disagree & Disagree	Total	
				N	%
Individual	250	44	24	318	80
Childminder	1	1	0	2	0.5
Crèche	2	0	0	2	0.5
Day Nursery	10	2	0	12	3
Out of School	3	0	1	4	1
Non-statutory Pre-School Education Playgroup/ Playgroup	20	1	1	22	6
Primary School	1	0	1	2	0.5
Statutory Nursery School/Unit	9	3	2	14	4
Sure Start	2	0	0	2	0.5
Other	19	3	0	22	6
Total	317	54	29	400	

Respondents were invited to give further comments on Objective 3.1 and its associated actions, and 193 comments were received.

Overall comments

Stakeholders across the early learning and childcare sector consistently linked sustainability to stable, long-term funding and clear accountability. Individual respondents emphasised the need for predictable financial support, transparent timelines and robust outcome measurements to ensure the continued availability of places, particularly in areas with limited provision. Privately operated settings, including day nurseries and out-of-school providers, highlighted strategic funding, governance and inclusion in advisory or accessibility funds as critical to maintaining capacity and responding to growing demand. There was also strong emphasis on defined roles, effective partnerships and strengthened accountability across organisations involved in delivery.

“Rural settings are closing—we need urgent support.”

“I strongly support the objective to build the sustainability and capacity of the early learning and childcare sector.”

Different provider types identified tailored supports as essential to long-term viability. Childminders stressed training pathways, financial assistance and access to professional or business advice, alongside meaningful involvement in decision-making as essential. Voluntary and community-based providers, such as pre-school playgroups and crèches, highlighted pressures on sessional and voluntary management models and the need for targeted funds. Statutory nursery schools and primary-attached units called for formal recognition, protected status and coordinated cross-departmental action, while Sure Start representatives emphasised the importance of integrated, preventative approaches and stronger collaboration across health, education and community services.

“A business advisory service reflects a childcare commodity model - I am an educational leader not a business owner.”

Objective 3.2: Enhance accessible Early Learning and Childcare for children with additional needs.

OBJECTIVE 3.2: ENHANCE ACCESSIBLE EARLY LEARNING AND CHILDCARE FOR CHILDREN WITH ADDITIONAL NEEDS	
<u>CATEGORY 1</u> ACTIONS Those already underway. (April 2024 to March 2026)	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Extend the reach of the DoH Fair Play Grant Scheme to approximately 80 settings, supporting nearly 400 children.• Launch a pilot scheme for recruitment of AHCs.• Establish Pre-school Inclusion Fund to support pre-school children with SEN/D.• Fund 72 special schools and early years specialist provisions to purchase resources, training or equipment for the benefit of children in pre-school, Primary 1 and Primary 2 in their settings.

<p>CATEGORY 2 ACTIONS</p> <p>Those that will be prioritised next subject to available resources. (April 2026 to March 2030)</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Further roll-out of the Pre-School Inclusion Fund to support children who have/may have SEN/D. • Combine and enhance the DoH Fair Play Grant Scheme and Bright Start Holiday Grant Scheme for Children with a Disability (to ensure a continuum of support across term time and non-term time for all registered childcare providers, including childminders). • Test and trial school-based childcare/after-school provision for children in special schools and specialist provision. • Build on the AHC pilot to increase the number and training provided to AHCs, including facilitating a matching service between families and AHCs.
<p>CATEGORY 3 ACTIONS</p> <p>Those that may take longer to implement. (April 2030 to March 2034)</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • In conjunction with the review of DoH Minimum Standards, consider the upper age limit which young people with SEN/D can access registered childcare provision.

Overall Response to Objective 3.2

407 responses were received to this Objective. Of those 407, 347 (85%) agreed or strongly agreed with the objective and its associated actions, 34 (8%) neither agreed nor disagreed, and 26 (6%) disagreed or strongly disagreed.

Figure 8: Response to Objective 3.2 by Agreement Rate (%)



Total responses to this question = 407. Note, percentages may not sum to 100% due to rounding.

Agree/Strongly Agree (85%)

Supportive respondents strongly welcomed the focus on improving provision for children with additional needs, especially through inclusion funding, specialist support and earlier intervention. Comments frequently referred to long waiting times, limited access to assessment and the strain placed on settings when needs are identified but not resourced. Even among those agreeing, there

was a clear message that inclusion funding must match the realities of practice if this objective is to deliver consistently across settings.

“Enhancing accessibility for children with additional needs is essential and very welcome.”

“I strongly agree with Objective 3.2, but it is crucial that inclusive early learning and childcare for children with additional needs is available in practice, not just in policy.”

Neither Agree nor Disagree (8%)

Respondents selecting neither agree nor disagree commonly accepted that support for children with additional needs must improve but doubted whether the actions proposed were sufficient for the realities faced by settings. Comments often referred to limited specialist input, the demands placed on providers and the under-recognised role of voluntary organisations in supporting families. The issue of staff to child ratios was also raised. The overall tone was one of guarded support mixed with concern about practical delivery.

“There is a missed opportunity to recognise and support the role that can be played by charities and voluntary organisations in supporting children with additional needs”

“Funding can provide great resources, but sometimes it’s more adults in a room that is needed!”

Disagree/Strongly Disagree (6%)

Respondents who disagreed or strongly disagreed commonly argued that the proposed measures were too limited in scale, too slow in timing or too uneven in their distribution across provider types. Comments often criticised the small number of children or settings likely to benefit, the impact of school-based provision on daycares, and the broader failure to address the immediate pressures faced by providers supporting children with additional needs. The view from this group was that the proposals were too narrow to meet the scale of demand.

“The numbers of children and settings being supported by this are minimal.”

“Funding special schools and early years specialist provisions to buy resources, training, or equipment may feel helpful, but it misses the fundamental issue: children with additional needs require purpose-built environments where education and health are fully integrated.”

Responses by Respondent Type

Of the 407 responses received for Objective 3.2, 323 (79%) were from individuals and 84 (21%) from organisations. Breakdowns by respondent type are available below.

Table 10: Responses to Objective 3.2 by Respondent Type

Objective 3.2 Category	Strongly Agree & Agree	Neither Agree nor Disagree	Strongly Disagree & Disagree	Total	
				N	%
Individual	273	27	23	323	79
Childminder	1	1	0	2	0.5
Crèche	2	0	0	2	0.5
Day Nursery	12	1	1	14	3
Out of School	3	1	0	4	1
Non-statutory Pre-School Education Playgroup/ Playgroup	18	2	0	20	5
Primary School	2	0	0	2	0.5
Statutory Nursery School/Unit	12	0	2	14	3
Sure Start	3	0	0	3	0.7
Other	21	2	0	23	6
Total	347	34	26	407	

Respondents were invited to give further comments on Objective 3.2 and its associated actions, and 162 comments were received.

Overall comments

Respondents across early learning, childcare, and education settings highlighted growing demand for inclusive provision for children with additional needs. There is widespread support for this objective, with common themes raised included rising complexity of needs, insufficient staffing ratios, and gaps in funding continuity between term and non-term time. Many stressed that support often stops when children move between settings (for example, from pre-school education to private daycare, or from school to afterschool provision), limiting sustained participation. There was widespread concern that

current ratios and resources are inadequate to keep all children safe and supported in mainstream environments.

“The inclusion fund has been invaluable—without it we couldn’t support SEN pupils.”

Across sectors, targeted inclusion funding was identified as critical to maintaining accessibility. Childminders, crèches, nurseries, playgroups, schools, and Sure Start projects all emphasised the need for enhanced grants, training, and reimbursement of additional staffing or material costs. Respondents also noted delays linked to diagnosis-based eligibility and referral processes, arguing for earlier identification, flexible funding models, and integrated family support to improve outcomes and inclusion.

“More SEN places and trained staff are urgently needed.”

Objective 3.3: Enhance the early years infrastructure through a skilled and valued workforce.

OBJECTIVE 3.3: ENHANCE THE EARLY YEARS INFRASTRUCTURE THROUGH A SKILLED AND VALUED WORKFORCE	
<p><u>CATEGORY 1</u> ACTIONS</p> <p>Those already underway (April 2024 to March 2026)</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Provide funding to DoH for an additional 900 funded training places, including continued professional development. • Provide funding to DfE for: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • development programme for the provision of on-line accredited micro courses by the Further Education Colleges to provide flexible learning opportunities for the childcare sector; and • a qualification mapping exercise to identify gaps in terms of management qualifications.
<p><u>CATEGORY 2</u> ACTIONS</p> <p>Those that will be prioritised next subject to available resources.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Develop a comprehensive ELC Workforce Plan to support the development of the current workforce and incentivise early learning and childcare as a valued career choice. • Establish a comprehensive ELC qualification and career framework with pathways for continuing professional development (CPD), including a review of existing qualifications, an accredited ELC programme and enhanced support for staff to move to leadership roles.

(April 2026 to March 2030)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Develop a specific SEN/D CPD framework for education settings and childcare providers. • Monitor the workforce needs of the ELC sector to ensure opportunities are provided for upskilling and reskilling, removing barriers to training opportunities, including support for sub cover. • Promote the establishment of a sectoral representative body to support the professionalisation of the childcare sector. • Require all ELC providers funded by Government, to pay their staff at least the Real Living Wage. • In conjunction with the 'Good Jobs' priority in DfE's Economic Vision, promote the Real Living Wage with early learning and childcare employing organisations.
<p>CATEGORY 3 ACTIONS</p> <p>Those that may take longer to implement. (April 2030 to March 2034)</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Strengthen regulation and inspection through collaboration between ETI and HSCTs. • In conjunction with DoH, ensure information gathered through Registration and Inspection within HSC Trusts is accessible through appropriate Data Sharing agreements to support longer term policy developments and operational implementation. • Consult on proposals for placing ELC provision on a legislative basis. • Review the staff: child ratio in statutory pre-school provision, considering the impact of other related actions to be introduced by this strategy and SEN reform.

Overall Response to Objective 3.3

400 responses were received to this Objective. Of those 407, 342 (86%) agreed or strongly agreed with the objective and its associated actions, 40 (10%) neither agreed nor disagreed, and 18 (5%) disagreed or strongly disagreed.

Figure 9: Response to Objective 3.3 by Agreement Rate (%)



Total responses to this question = 400. Note, percentages may not sum to 100% due to rounding.

Agree/Strongly Agree (86%)

This cohort endorsed the aim of building a skilled and valued workforce, particularly through clearer career pathways, training and improved pay. Many comments welcomed recognition of the sector's professionalism and saw workforce reform as essential to quality. They also stressed that training and expectations must be matched by realistic, sustained funding, otherwise retention problems and staffing shortages will continue. Other issues raised included the need for teacher led provision, review of staff to child ratios and review of regulation.

“A skilled, valued and properly supported workforce is fundamental to delivering high-quality early learning and childcare.”

Neither Agree nor Disagree (10%)

Neutral responses typically agreed with the principle of a better-paid and better-trained workforce but argued that the proposals did not go far enough. Many comments focused on the need to recognise qualifications, experience and the complexity of the role more clearly than a simple living-wage commitment would allow. There was broad support for professionalisation, but uncertainty about whether the proposals would deliver fair pay, access to training and long-term retention.

“Positive that there is recognition for the need to professionalise the sector which will in turn create ambition and draw people to the sector - but how?”

Disagree/Strongly Disagree (5%)

Critical respondents argued that the workforce proposals would not solve the sector's underlying problems and, in some cases, could increase pressure on already stretched practitioners. Comments frequently referred to low pay, unpaid training time, insecure contracts and the need to distinguish more clearly between childcare and teacher-led education. This group tended to see the proposals as insufficiently practical, inadequately funded and in need of more fundamental redesign.

“Many will question their career choices with only getting minimum wage, zero-hour contracts and difficult working conditions.”

Responses by Respondent Type

Of the 400 responses received for Objective 3.3, 319 (80%) were from individuals and 81 (20%) from organisations. Breakdowns by respondent type are available below.

Table 11: Responses to Objective 3.2 by Respondent Type

Objective 3.3 Category	Strongly Agree & Agree	Neither Agree nor Disagree	Strongly Disagree & Disagree	Total	
				N	%
Individual	273	29	17	319	80
Childminder	1	1	0	2	0.5
Crèche	1	1	0	2	0.5
Day Nursery	11	2	0	13	3
Out of School	4	0	0	4	1
Non-statutory Pre-School Education Playgroup/ Playgroup	19	2	0	21	5
Primary School	2	0	0	2	0.5
Statutory Nursery School/Unit	11	2	1	14	4
Sure Start	3	0	0	3	0.8
Other	17	3	0	20	5
Total	342	40	18	400	

Respondents were invited to give further comments on Objective 3.3 and its associated actions, and 189 comments were received.

Overall comments

Across early years and school-age childcare settings, respondents consistently highlighted low pay, limited career progression, and insufficient access to funded professional development as key challenges affecting recruitment and long-term retention. Practitioners, childminders, crèches, day nurseries, and out-of-school providers all emphasised that pay often fails to reflect workload, responsibility and qualifications, with many staff paid at or near minimum wage. There was strong consensus that clearer, sector-wide qualification and remuneration frameworks, alongside funded CPD and opportunities for progression into leadership roles are essential to professionalise the workforce and improve sustainability.

“Expanding access to childcare without addressing workforce and infrastructure constraints risks placing further pressure on an already stretched system. The level of transformation set out in the Strategy will not be achievable without sustained and multi-year public investment.”

Sector-specific concerns also emerged. Primary school nursery units and statutory nursery schools stressed workforce availability, staffing ratios, and the importance of protecting teacher-led provision to maintain quality and safety. Sure Start services highlighted growing developmental and SEN/D needs, calling for structured CPD frameworks with dedicated inclusion-focused training. Voluntary playgroups and school-age childcare staff sought greater recognition and parity with other early years roles. Overall, respondents agreed that improving quality, capacity, and outcomes across the sector depends on valuing the workforce through fair pay, recognised qualifications, and well-supported professional development pathways.

“Proposals aimed at strengthening workforce development, enhancing sustainability, and promoting professional recognition are welcome. However, there must also be a clear and distinct acknowledgement of teacher-led expertise.”

“We urgently need a ratio review for statutory nursery schools.”

Section 4: Analysis of Written Responses

- 4.1 A full list of those submitting written responses is attached at Annex A. Of the written responses four were received from members of the public; one combined response from a group of academics and 51 from organisations. Of those received from organisations, 28 were from Voluntary & Community and Charitable bodies, three from Local Councils, four from Union Representative organisations, two from School bodies, three from Health and Social Care Trusts, three on behalf of Nursery Schools, two representing Neighbourhood Renewal Partnerships, three from Sure Start projects and three from Political Parties.
- 4.2 The responses covered a wide range of issues. As a similar response format was not used by written respondents it is not possible to give a quantitative data analysis as that provided above in respect of the online consultation survey. Nor is it possible to detail all issues raised and comments made. We have therefore reflected the key views expressed, in particular those common across responses.

Written responses from Individuals

- 4.3 Four individuals submitted written responses to the consultation, three of which focused on School-Age Childcare (SAC). Welcoming the Strategy, the need to better recognise and support SAC was a key issue. Equitable regulation across childcare provision including provision on school estates and the importance of play for SAC were raised. Views expressed called for better funding for SAC, the need to build on existing programmes, such as Bright Start and sector-led models of delivery, consideration for teacher led pre-school education for all children and reduction in adult child ratios in statutory pre-school education settings. In line with views expressed at the in-person events, clearer terminology within the Strategy of age ranges to support consistent application regarding pre-school education and childcare was sought, as was recognition of the need to strengthen the workforce in these sectors.

Collective written response from academics

- 4.4 A collective response was received from a group of 6 academics from the Ulster University, Stranmillis University, MIC and Loughborough. They recognise pre-school education standardisation as a positive step though feel it crucial to have the approach to Pupil Allocation Numbers (PAN) reviewed, in particular with regard to the impact within rural areas. The removal of social disadvantage criterion is viewed as premature until every child is able to access 22.5

hrs pre-school education provision and the timeline for full standardisation (completion of 2034) is considered to be concerning. The extension of Sure Start is viewed as positive citing strong evidence to show the positive short and medium-term effects on children's education, with the potential for geographic eligibility impacting those facing disadvantage raised as a concern. Clarity is also sought on linkages between the proposed Early Year Framework and existing curricula. With regard to the NICSS, the proposals to increase the subsidy caused concern without price controls, and comments regarding workforce included the need for a dedicated, costed, time-bound workforce development plan as a core pillar of reform.

Written responses submitted by organisations

- 4.5 51 written responses were received from a wide variety of organisations. Broad support was expressed across the written responses for the Strategy's ambition and direction of travel. There was strong support for the key themes and associated objectives within the draft strategy including expanding funded pre-school education provision to 22.5 hours, often described as a positive step for child development and parental employment. There was endorsement of early intervention measures, in particular Sure Start and related targeted programmes, as a way to reduce inequality and improve outcomes early and for a 0-6 curriculum or integrated Early Years Framework to bring more coherence across provision. Consistent recognition was expressed that workforce development is vital, including qualifications, CPD, career pathways, recruitment, retention and better pay.
- 4.6 There was also shared concern that ambition is ahead of implementation with funding, staffing, inclusion, market sustainability and targeted support requiring more detail if the Strategy is to deliver. With regard to access and inclusion for children with SEN/additional needs, there was overall support, however some respondents viewed the current draft proposals as not being sufficiently detailed. While welcoming childcare affordability measures, comments included concern on how effective they will be in practice. The most frequent criticism was the lack of a clearly costed implementation plan, with too much depending on future resources or funding beyond 2026.
- 4.7 The following gives a thematic analysis and summation of the range of key views expressed in the written responses received.

Standardisation of Pre-school Education

4.8 Standardisation of the pre-school education programme was one of the most widely supported proposals in the document. Organisations generally welcomed it in principle, while warning that it must not become a one-size-fits-all model or weaken access, quality or provider sustainability. Over half of written respondents mentioned standardisation directly. They support 22.5 hours as a positive extension of funded pre-school education provision, conditional on there being adequate capacity, workforce and funding. Several respondents felt that if not properly managed, standardisation could destabilise mixed provision or reduce places or choice if sufficient capacity was not preserved alongside the policy. Respondents from the statutory nursery sector were particularly concerned about how standardisation could affect teacher-led provision and quality.

“Providers welcomed the possibility of slower-paced days / pedagogy, richer learning experiences and stronger family relationships, but also highlighted serious risks around parental choice, the future of pre-pre-school provision, uneven treatment of non-statutory settings and lack of clarity in the standardisation process.”

4.9 Approximately a third of written respondents commented directly on the possible removal or changes to the statutory socially disadvantaged circumstances admissions criteria. Views were mixed, some voiced concern about potential disadvantages to socio-economically disadvantaged children if the criterion were removed before universal full-time provision was available, while others felt the statutory criterion was unnecessary and unfair.

“Removing prioritisation while places remain limited for several years risks weakening a key mechanism that currently helps ensure that children most likely to benefit are able to access early education.”

Ratios

4.10 A small number (7) of written responses raised the issue of the current adult:child ratios in statutory pre-school education provision. Some educational respondents argued that current ratios of 1:13 are no longer realistic given the complexity of children’s needs, particularly in SEN contexts. Although ratios were raised by a limited number of written respondents, those that

mentioned the issue were consistent in the view that staffing must reflect real need, quality and safety rather than minimum compliance.

“The staff:child ratios of 1:8 in non-statutory pre-school provision should be replicated for the statutory sector and be addressed sooner rather than later.”

Provision for 0-2 year olds and 2-3 year old developmental programme

4.11 A small number (4) of written respondents raise age-appropriate provision with regard children aged 0-2. There was concern that pre-pre-school provision could affect playgroup sustainability and how inappropriate pre-pre-school placements can negatively impact development. Some viewed the Strategy insufficiently recognising developmental needs in the 0-2 phase. The shared message was one of caution, that younger children need developmentally appropriate provision, and expansion should not unintentionally displace existing community or play-based models to ensure needs are met.

4.12 Many of the respondents had similar comments on a development programme for 2–3-year-olds. A third supported developmental provision in principle, however, raised concerns about the lack of clarity on delivery, delayed timelines, insufficient capacity, and the need to keep provision developmentally appropriate. Some stressed this age group as critical for early identification of need, while others warned against simply extending formal hours without enough relational and specialist support. Overall support was positive, but heavily qualified. Respondents wanted an expansion for 2–3-year-olds to be carefully designed rather than rushed or treated as a simple scaling-up exercise.

“Extending developmental provision at 2-3 years is very welcome as evidence reinforces the positive impact of intervention at this age in relation to speech, language, emotional regulation, trauma impacts and socio-economic development and inclusion.”

It is very important to note that having children in the wrong age and stage environment will increase educational underachievement.”

Distinction between formal Education and Childcare

4.13 Strong views were expressed through the on-line survey and in-person events on the distinction needed between education and childcare. This was also reflected within the organisational written responses. Many supported inclusion of early education actions in the Strategy but cautioned against the risk of a focus on childcare overshadowing educational quality, teacher-led practice or child development. Several written respondents suggested the Strategy risks conflating early education and childcare, even though the two serve related but distinct purposes. Statutory pre-school education voices were particularly concerned that an agenda focussed on affordability of childcare could weaken educational quality, pedagogy and the status of nursery education. Comments also raised the need to ensure provision was developmental, relational and play-based.

“If the Executive proceeds with a single, combined strategy, an emphasis must be placed on strengthening the education component and highlighting the distinct difference in provision.”

0-6 Curriculum

4.14 Approximately a third of written respondents commented on a 0-6 curriculum or integrated early years framework and were supportive of a more coherent 0-6 framework to align learning, development and services across early years settings. It was seen as a useful way to improve coherence, provided it takes cognisance of existing measures, respects different settings and children’s developmental needs. Several responses set out views on the strength of the current pre-school education curricular guidance, suggesting that this should be retained and protected within the framework.

“We are pleased to see the action to develop an early years curriculum framework for 0-6 years. This will improve quality, consistency and continuity of early learning across childhood - The curriculum must reflect the different early years settings and their needs.”

Targeted intervention

4.15 Targeted early intervention is one of the clearest areas of consensus. The issue is less whether these programmes matter, and more whether they will be protected, properly funded and expanded equitably. Half of organisations that submitted written responses mention one or more of Sure Start, Pathway, Toybox or other targeted disadvantage measures. Sure Start and related interventions were seen as one of strongest common positives in the Strategy. They were widely valued as proven targeted early intervention supports with many organisations supporting the expansion of Sure Start, Pathway and Toybox, especially for disadvantaged communities. At the same time, they suggest that targeted programmes should not be universalised in a way that weakens their focus or stretches resources too thinly. Some noted geographical gaps, funding instability and concern that rural or non-Sure Start areas may still be left behind and the need for inclusive Roma, newcomer-focused and culturally responsive programmes.

“Expanding access to an additional 2,500 children through geographic expansion and 1,800 children through outreach, represents a meaningful step towards addressing unmet need, especially for families who may not engage with centre-based services and those in rural areas.”

Support for SEN/D and Additional Needs

4.16 This was a major cross-cutting issue for over half of written respondents. There was strong support for more inclusive provision, but many respondents viewed the Strategy as still lacking the detail, staffing and funding needed to make inclusion real. Inclusion was welcome as a principle but was viewed as not operationally secure. Respondents repeatedly mentioned shortages in specialist staff, weak referral pathways, delayed supports, fragmented access and insufficient funding for inclusive provision. Several saw expansion of hours or places not improving access for disabled children unless specialist planning and workforce development happened first. With some noting that costs were higher for families of disabled children and that generic affordability measures may not cover those extra needs.

“Work on developing early interventions must be progressed as a matter of urgency to ensure our children and young people access the support they require. Any actions subjected to being between April 2030 to March 2034 should be reviewed to be introduced as early as possible.”

The ‘establishment’ and ‘continuation’ of the Pre-school Inclusion Fund to support children with special educational needs is both welcomed and necessary as both statutory and non-statutory settings seek to support ever increasing numbers of children with additional and special educational needs.

Rurality

4.17 11 organisations raised rural need, some referring to rural childcare ‘deserts’ of limited local provision, transport barriers and the higher cost of delivering services in dispersed areas. Some respondents felt that subsidies alone do not help if there is no childcare available locally, with others viewing rural proofing as insufficient and raised the potential for per-capita funding models for disadvantage rural areas. There was also concern that children aged 0-2 and families needing flexible care were particularly poorly served in rural areas.

“We recommend that the strategy includes specific measures to address rural access and transport barriers.”

Irish-Medium Provision

4.18 A small number of organisations mention Irish-medium provision and broader linguistic inclusion. It was a focused but clear theme: language-based provision should not be treated as an add-on and implementation needs to recognise Irish-medium requirements explicitly. The main criticism was that Irish-medium early years provision was not sufficiently recognised in the Strategy. Respondents highlighted the distinct pedagogical and statutory needs of immersive provision, including staffing, language proficiency, inspection and planning. Some argued that funding models do not properly account for costs or specialist support through Irish.

“It is important to recognise the current and projected growth of the Irish medium sector and that significant investment is allocated accordingly.”

Provision for ethnic minority families

4.19 A fifth of written responses raised the needs of ethnic minority families, with calls for culturally responsive co-design for newcomer families. Some raised limited consideration of newcomer, migrant and sanctuary-seeking families. Instability around support for Roma families, lack of translated materials, of linguistic inclusion and the absence of Ulster Scots support services were also highlighted. Several responses mentioned language barriers, digital barriers, and difficulty in understanding schemes and systems including the NICSS, with the need for the Strategy to reflect stronger cultural and linguistic accessibility for minority and newcomer families.

“We strongly support the three core themes of the Strategy and welcome the fact that you intend to provide targeted support at those families facing disadvantage and with additional needs. In this context, we would strongly urge you to consider further the specific needs of migrant, traveller and minority ethnic children and families.”

Home Based Care

4.20 A limited number (6 organisations) mentioned childminding or home-based childcare. There was support for the expansion of Approved Home Childcare with others raising the limited commitment to this. Childminding was viewed as a vital and flexible model, especially for rural families and working parents needing personalised care. The impact of restrictive ratios, administrative burden, funding access problems and recruitment decline was also raised. Some wider responses felt that home-based care could help address flexibility gaps. Home-based care was raised as an underused part of the solution, especially for flexibility, inclusion and rural access.

“Policy and funding approaches designed primarily around centre-based provision may not always translate effectively to home-based models.”

Affordability

4.21 26 organisations mentioned affordability of childcare provision, fee levels and caps. Affordability was widely welcomed as a central aim of the Strategy, and NICSS was often acknowledged as a useful policy step. However, many respondents argued that subsidies alone could be absorbed by rising provider fees, leaving families with little real gain. Calls for fee caps or some form of price regulation appeared repeatedly with a call for clear consideration of the issue. Others pointed to narrow eligibility, upfront payment barriers of Universal Credit, exclusion of some Universal Credit claimants and lack of clarity about NICSS scope or long-term funding. Providers also warned that affordability schemes may destabilise services if the true cost of delivery was not funded. There was broad support for affordability actions, but strong scepticism that demand-side subsidy on its own could solve the problem of affordability. Concern was also raised that timescales were inadequate and that there was a lack of recognition of inflationary increases in projected benefits.

“High childcare costs can restrict labour market participation, especially when looking at participation from a gendered perspective, and create recruitment and retention pressures for employers.”

“The strategy must make an explicit connection between workforce investment, gender equality and the broader economic case for well-funded, well-staffed early years provision. Improved pay and conditions for childcare workers must be accompanied by mechanisms to prevent those costs being passed on to families through higher fees.”

Workforce

4.22 More than 30 organisations commented on workforce issues such as pay, qualifications, CPD, parity, specialist training, career pathways, recruitment difficulties and retention problems. Many respondents commented that the Strategy recognised workforce importance but lacked a credible funded workforce plan. Specialist training for SEN, disability, trauma-informed practice, communication support and inclusive practice was repeatedly requested. Providers and union representative organisations emphasised that any expansion of services was unrealistic without stronger recruitment and retention measures. Several organisations also raised weak professional recognition of the early years workforce compared with the expectations placed on it. Workforce capacity was the strongest cross-cutting risk identified in the responses, seen as under-pining nearly every other issue: affordability, inclusion, quality, expansion and sustainability.

“Workforce focused measures (3.2 and 3.3), like pilot recruitment of Allied Health Professionals and additional CPD pathways, are key to working alongside Sensory Service and other specialist professionals in terms of better supporting children with additional needs.”

“We have stressed that the childcare workforce is insufficiently supported, both in terms of pay and in terms of career development and working conditions. As such, we welcome that the Strategy intends to centre these issues.”

Real Living Wage/Pay

4.23 Approximately a third of written responses commented on the Real Living Wage, low pay or better remuneration for early learning and childcare staff. Low pay was one of the most repeated structural concerns. Some respondents explicitly supported the Real Living Wage; others more broadly called for better pay, conditions and professional recognition. Many linked poor remuneration directly to recruitment and retention problems, weak progression routes and difficulty expanding provision safely. There was also a repeated concern that affordability measures for parents could not be achieved by suppressing workforce pay. The consistent message was that workforce reform would be impossible without a pay framework with better wages seen, not as an optional extra, but as essential to quality, capacity and sustainability.

“There’s a missed opportunity in this draft Strategy to improve standards for childcare workers by requiring that all providers pay the Real Living Wage. This should be a core commitment of the Strategy.”

Section 5: Draft Impact Assessments

5.1 The following three draft impact assessments were published on 17 December 2025 along with the draft ELC Strategy for consultation:

- Draft Equality Impact Assessment
- Draft Rural Needs Impact Assessment
- Draft Child Rights Impact Assessment

Draft Equality Impact Assessment (EQIA)

358 responses were received to the draft EQIA. Of those 358, 308 (86%) agreed, and 50 (14%) disagreed.

Figure 10: Response to draft Equality Impact Assessment by Agreement Rate (%)



Total responses to this question = 358. Note, percentages may not sum to 100% due to rounding.

Responses by Respondent Type

Of the 358 responses received for the draft EQIA, 284 (79%) were from individuals and 74 (21%) from organisations. Breakdowns by respondent type are available below.

Table 12: Responses to draft Equality Impact Assessment by Respondent Type

EQIA Category	Agree	Disagree	Total	
			N	%
Individual	242	42	284	79
Childminder	2	0	2	0.6
Crèche	1	1	2	0.6
Day Nursery	9	3	12	3
Out of School	4	0	4	1
Non-statutory Pre-School Education Playgroup/ Playgroup	19	0	19	5
Primary School	1	0	1	0.3
Statutory Nursery School/Unit	8	3	11	3
Sure Start	3	0	3	0.8
Other	19	1	20	6
Total	308	50	358	

Analysis of comments

Respondents were invited to give further comments on the draft EQIA, and 61 comments were received.

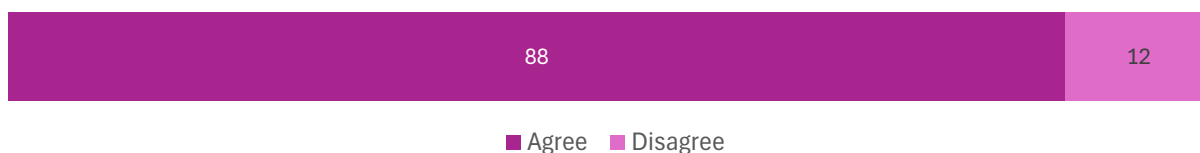
A variety of themes were evident, including concerns that the EQIA recognises inequality in theory but underestimates how it plays out in practice. Again, some opposition to treating nursery education and childcare as interchangeable was referenced, with many respondents arguing that doing so risks undermining equality by disadvantaging children who benefit most from teacher-led, pedagogical early education, especially those facing social disadvantage or with special educational needs. The impact on vulnerable groups was raised, including low-income families, rural communities, children with additional or emerging needs, newcomer families, and Irish-medium settings, with repeated warnings that proposed changes could widen rather than reduce inequality.

Other themes included financial affordability for working parents, inequality affecting the early years workforce, and the need for continuous monitoring, clearer accountability and better engagement with providers, to ensure equality commitments translate into real change.

Draft Rural Needs Assessment

352 responses were received to the draft Rural Needs Assessment. Of those 352, 309 (88%) agreed, and 43 (12%) disagreed.

Figure 11: Response to draft Rural Needs Assessment by Agreement Rate (%)



Total responses to this question = 352. Note, percentages may not sum to 100% due to rounding.

Responses by Respondent Type

Of the 352 responses received for the draft Rural Needs Assessment, 281 (80%) were from individuals and 71 (20%) from organisations. Breakdowns by respondent type are available below.

Table 13: Responses to draft Rural Needs Assessment by Respondent Type

Rural Needs Category	Agree	Disagree	Total	
			N	%
Individual	245	36	281	80
Childminder	2	0	2	0.6
Crèche	1	1	2	0.6
Day Nursery	10	1	11	3
Out of School	4	0	4	1
Non-statutory Pre-School Education Playgroup/ Playgroup	17	2	19	5
Primary School	1	0	1	0.3
Statutory Nursery School/Unit	9	2	11	3
Sure Start	3	0	3	0.9
Other	17	1	18	5
Total	309	43	352	

Analysis of comments

Respondents were invited to give further comments on the draft Rural Needs Assessment, and 52 comments were received.

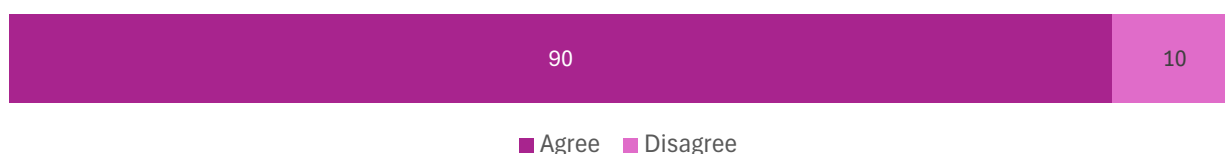
Responses reflected the disadvantage faced by rural families, with widespread concern that limited choice, long travel distances, transport barriers, workforce shortages and “childcare deserts” are widening urban-rural inequality. The central role of maintained/controlled nursery schools in rural communities was raised, warning that subsidised childcare expansion could destabilise their viability and reduce access to specialist provision.

Other themes included targeted rural funding, workforce challenges regarding recruitment, retention, travel time, and training access in rural areas, wraparound and atypical-hours provision, early access to SEN/D services and co-located support, digital exclusion in rural areas, and stronger monitoring and accountability.

Draft Child Rights Assessment

356 responses were received to the draft Child Rights Assessment. Of those 356, 320 (90%) agreed, and 36 (10%) disagreed.

Figure 12: Response to draft Child Rights Assessment by Agreement Rate (%)



Total responses to this question = 356. Note, percentages may not sum to 100% due to rounding.

Responses by Respondent Type

Of the 356 responses received for the draft Child Rights Assessment, 282 (79%) were from individuals and 74 (21%) from organisations. Breakdowns by respondent type are available below.

Table 14: Responses to draft Child Rights Assessment by Respondent Type

Child Rights Category	Agree	Disagree	Total	
			N	%
Individual	252	30	282	79
Childminder	2	0	2	0.6
Crèche	1	1	2	0.6
Day Nursery	11	0	11	3
Out of School	4	0	4	1
Non-statutory Pre-School Education Playgroup/ Playgroup	19	1	20	6

Primary School	1	0	1	0.3
Statutory Nursery School/Unit	10	2	12	3
Sure Start	3	0	3	0.8
Other	17	2	19	5
Total	320	36	356	

Analysis of comments

Respondents were invited to give further comments on the draft Child Rights Assessment, and 48 comments were received.

Respondents again took the opportunity to highlight concerns regarding treating childcare and early education as interchangeable, with many respondents emphasising children’s right to high-quality, teacher-led early education, the need to protect maintained nursery schools, and the primacy of the child’s best interests over economic or labour-market goals. Respondents also highlighted inequality of access, especially for children with special educational needs, those in rural areas, Irish-medium provision, and children facing poverty or multiple disadvantages, with repeated calls for timely, adequately funded support.

Other themes included financial pressures on families, the importance of workforce wellbeing and fair pay as a children’s rights issue, the need to hear children’s voices, and calls for a more preventative, whole-child and family-centred approach.

Section 6: Conclusion

6.1 The consultation has endorsed the proposed strategic Themes, objectives and proposed actions through the overwhelmingly positive response to each, by the majority of respondents, but also highlighting a number of issues for further consideration. This document summarises the main issues raised by respondents. All responses received are being considered in determining the content of the final strategy.

Table 16: Responses to all objectives by agreement rate (%)

Agreement Rate	Obj. 1.1	Obj. 1.2	Obj. 1.3	Obj. 1.4	Obj. 2.1	Obj. 2.2	Obj. 3.1	Obj. 3.2	Obj. 3.3
Strongly Agree	46.1	38.8	46.7	43.2	48.1	42.8	43.5	47.2	46.8
Agree	34.8	37.8	31.6	35.3	29.9	37.9	35.8	38.1	38.8
TOTAL	81%	77%	78%	79%	78%	81%	79%	85%	86%
Neither Agree or Disagree	8.82	14.9	11.6	13.6	11	13.4	13.5	8.4	10
Disagree	5.9	5.1	5.9	4.9	5.7	3.5	4	4.7	1.8
Strongly Disagree	4.4	3.4	4.2	3	5.2	2.5	3.3	1.7	2.8

Next Steps

6.2 The views expressed and feedback gathered through the consultation process including this summation will inform the final Northern Ireland Executive’s Early Learning and Childcare Strategy and the associated implementation plan.

6.3 The cross departmental ELC Strategy Task and Finish Group, informed by the consultation, will finalise the Strategy for Executive consideration by autumn 2026.

Written Responses - List of Organisations that Responded

1.	4-11's After Schools Club
2.	Action for Children NI
3.	Aghadowey Pre-school Playgroup
4.	Alliance Party
5.	Altram
6.	Anonymous
7.	Armoy Cross-Community playgroup
8.	Ashgrove Nursery School
9.	Ashgrove Pre-School Playgroup
10.	Ballymoney & District Community Playgroup
11.	Barnardo's NI
12.	Beechmount Sure Start
13.	Bees Nees Early Years Centre
14.	Belfast City Council
15.	Belfast YMCA
16.	Bethlehem Nursery School
17.	Blossom Sure Start
18.	Book Trust
19.	Bright Beginnings Daycare Magherafelt
20.	Bright Stars
21.	British Association for Early Childhood Education (Early Education)
22.	British Association for Music Therapy
23.	Carers NI
24.	Carr Preschool
25.	Carrowdore Early Years
26.	Castlereagh Nursery School
27.	Children in NI (CiNI)
28.	Clifton School Bangor
29.	Clonduff Playgroup
30.	Comhairle na Gaelscolaiochte (CnaG)
31.	Controlled Schools' Support Council
32.	Convent of Mercy Nursery School
33.	Cookstown Nursery School
34.	Cornabracken Child Care Ltd
35.	Derry/Strabane Council
36.	Downshire Integrated Nursery School
37.	Drumnamoe Nursery School
38.	Dundonald Nursery
39.	Dunluce Family Centre
40.	Early Interventions Team BHSC
41.	Early Years Inspection & Registration Team BHSC
42.	Early Years Organisation (EYO)
43.	Early Years Team Bangor – SEHSC
44.	Early Years, Care, Education & Play Employers Forum
45.	East Belfast Sure Start
46.	Enniskillen Neighbourhood Renewal Partnership
47.	Equality Commission for Northern Ireland
48.	Evangelical Alliance & Both Lives
49.	Family Fund
50.	Federation of Small Businesses
51.	Fermanagh & Omagh District Council
52.	First Steps Children's Centre
53.	Foras na Gaeilge
54.	Forge Integrated Pre-School
55.	Friends Day Nursery
56.	Garvagh Community Pre-School Playgroup
57.	Giggles & Wiggles Childcare Ltd

58.	Glenarm Community pre-school
59.	Glengormley Integrated Pre-school
60.	Glenn and Barr Playgroup
61.	Greenfields
62.	Gut Health Matters
63.	Happy Days Afterschool/Little Handprints Carers/Parents & Tots
64.	Harmony Nursery Unit
65.	HERe NI
66.	Holy Cross Nursery School
67.	Home-Start UK
68.	Integrated Early Years' Service (IEYS) Early Years Consortium
69.	Integrated Education Fund
70.	Ionad Uíbh Eachach
71.	Irish Congress of Trade Unions
72.	Jack & Jill childcare
73.	Jiminy Crickets After School Club
74.	Jolly Pirates Pre-School
75.	Jolly Rodgers Day Nursery Ltd
76.	Kiddies Castle Early Years
77.	Kilmood Playgroup
78.	Kilmood Preschool
79.	Kim Heaney Childcare
80.	Linn Primary School Nursery Unit
81.	Lisbellaw Primary School and Community Nursery
82.	Little Bears Day Nursery
83.	Little Doves Childcare Centre
84.	Little Flower Nursery
85.	Little Hands Preschool
86.	Loughgiel Early Years and Afterschools
87.	Magherafelt Integrated Nursery School
88.	Melted Parents NI
89.	Mencap NI
90.	Mossgrove Primary School and Nursery Unit
91.	Muckamore Pre-school
92.	Naíscoil Cholmcille
93.	National Association of Head Teachers (NAHT)
94.	National Children's Bureau
95.	National Deaf Children's Society
96.	National Education Union (NEU)
97.	Newcastle Preschool Playgroup
98.	NI Anti-Poverty Network
99.	NI Chamber
100.	NI Women's Budget Group (NIWBG)
101.	NICMA
102.	Northern Ireland Human Rights Commission (NIHRC)
103.	NSPCC
104.	Office of Identity and Cultural Expression
105.	Office of the Mental Health Champion
106.	Omagh Integrated PS
107.	Omagh Neighbourhood Renewal Partnership
108.	Outerwest Sure Start
109.	Phoenix Education Centre
110.	Playboard NI
111.	Portadown Play Groups
112.	Puzzles Playgroup
113.	Rocking Horse Nursery
114.	School Age Childcare and Playwork Forum
115.	SDLP
116.	Sinn Fein
117.	SOLAS Special Needs Charity
118.	South Belfast Sure Start
119.	Southern Health and Social Care Trust

120.	St. John's Bright Start
121.	Stranmillis University College, Early Childhood Research and Innovation Hub
122.	Strathfoyle Nursery School
123.	Sunflower Early Years Playgroup
124.	The Council for Integrated Education
125.	The Open University in Ireland
126.	Trinity Nursery School
127.	UNISON
128.	Wee Bears Day nursery
129.	West Belfast Nursery Area Learning Community
130.	Women's Centre Derry
131.	Women's Policy Group NI
132.	Women's Regional Consortium

*Total number of organisations submitting responses was 132. 4 separate responses were received from individuals and 1 combined response on behalf of academics.