

**Statement to the Assembly**

**Update on Childcare Strategy developments including proposal to offer every child in their pre-school year a minimum of 22.5 hours pre-school education per week**

**7 September 2022**

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Minister of Education**

This statement provides an update on the ongoing work to develop an Executive Childcare Strategy including a proposal to offer every child in their pre-school year a minimum of 22.5 hours pre-school education per week as a core component of any expanded provision.

New Decade, New Approach (NDNA) set out the following commitment: *“The Executive will publish a Childcare Strategy and will give immediate priority to developing arrangements to deliver extended, affordable, responsive, high quality provision of early education and care initiatives for families with children aged 3-4.”*

Work on the development of a Childcare Strategy had to be paused during the pandemic with staff resource re-directed to providing emergency financial support for the childcare sector. With the recommencement of work on the Strategy, I now want to provide an update on progress and outline some of the key developments planned for the coming months.

Our engagement with stakeholders has made it clear that early learning and childcare for pre-school children needs to be considered together to ensure a coherent package of support during the early years of a child’s life which supports learning and enables parents to work. This connection is reflected within the NDNA commitment to extend both ‘early education and childcare provision’. The plan is therefore to develop an integrated Early Learning and Childcare Strategy which incorporates an update of the current Learning to Learn Policy Framework.

There is broad agreement that a core component of this should be an expanded and standardised pre-school offer. The Expert Panel on Educational Underachievement in NI, final report “A Fair Start” recommended that *“DE should standardise the length of the pre-school education day to at least 4.5 hours per day (22.5hours per week), including access to free school meals for eligible children, thereby improving equality of provision.”*

***I believe implementing this should be a priority.***

To put this in context, currently, 40% of children get this level of provision (22.5 hours per week) with the remaining (60%) receiving at least 12.5 hours per week.

Transitioning all funded provision to the longer day will require careful planning. To assist with this I have allocated funding for the development of a costed delivery plan and timetable with work commencing in the autumn. The planning for standardisation will also consider other aspects of the pre-school programme including the socially disadvantaged admission criteria, funding levels, uptake and attendance, access to training and development for staff and the nature of support provided for children with additional needs.

I am preparing a pilot programme to facilitate the creation of new full-time statutory nursery provision in areas where there is over-provision. This will be addressed by allowing conversion of two part-time classes to one full-time class. This is an important first step which will inform a phased lifting of the current moratorium that has been in place for nearly ten years, which has prevented the establishment of new full-time pre-school provision. In parallel, my officials will consider the streamlining of the administrative processes to facilitate part-time pre-school provision that could convert to full-time provision from September 2023 onwards.

In addition, there are other important developments which will help inform the wider strategy. These include –

- **The establishment of a new Stakeholder Engagement Forum** to ensure all relevant parties have a voice. Invitations will be issued this week. It is envisaged that the first meeting of the Forum will be held in October 2022;
- **The commissioning of an independent body** to take forward a Review of Childcare Services in NI and provide an evidence base on the childcare sector. Work commenced on the review at the end of June. A parental survey issued on 6<sup>th</sup> September and a childcare provider survey will issue w/c 12 September. Further focus groups will take place over the coming weeks. The final report is expected by end of December 2022;
- **A review of DE targeted early years interventions** which includes consideration of how Sure Start services are currently targeted. The review has already commenced with stakeholder engagement well underway. A final report is expected by end of November 2022;

- **Publication of the Department of Finance Strategic Insight Lab Report** which identifies stakeholders' key issues/concerns. The report will be published before the end of this week.

The affordability of childcare is raised consistently by stakeholders and this is being considered as part of the Review of Childcare Services. I am conscious, however, of the immediate cost of living pressures being faced by families and my Department has been working closely with the Department of Health to actively promote the existing financial support available towards the cost of childcare. Evidence from HMRC indicates that only around one third of those eligible for Tax-Free Childcare payments currently claim them. In order to encourage uptake a promotional campaign is ongoing to raise awareness of the support available. In a further attempt to assist families with childcare costs, I have written to the UK Chancellor asking him to consider an uplift from 20% to 30% to the rate of the UK Government's contribution, as part of the Tax-Free Childcare Scheme.

I have also been engaging with the Health Minister to identify any potential easements within the regulatory framework which may help to relieve some of the current pressures experienced by childcare providers. As a result of these discussions, the Health Minister and I have jointly written to the Justice Minister seeking an update on the longstanding proposal for AccessNI to move to a system of portable record disclosures. This would remove the requirement for those on whom there is no new relevant information, to have a criminal record check processed on each occasion they seek work with a new employer. This would benefit the childcare sector by reducing the time taken for them to recruit new staff. Any process changes or new measures introduced must continue to ensure the safety of children is paramount.

Early learning and childcare services impact on a number of policies from a range of departments. My Department will continue to work with all relevant stakeholders on the development of the Strategy.

It is my intention that costed options will be ready for consideration by March 2023.